



Chapter 38 - Answers

Miraculous but Messy

A couple of questions first:

1. Do you think it's possible for God to take a very bad, immoral situation and change it totally into something beautiful, peaceful, and part of His plan to save the world?

If your answer is yes, then please give an example of this.

(suggestions: Satan kills Jesus on the cross - but God uses this to save the world. Hitler trying to exterminate Jews and instead God uses this to inspire the Jews to establish their homeland in Israel - 1940's)

2. So, if this is possible, then what makes the difference between a very bad, immoral situation which is hopeless and only gets worse...and a very bad, immoral situation which is flipped upside down by God?

Answer: Somebody believes what God has said and exercises faith.

Now...on to our scripture passage today: In this chapter we'll find what I think is one of the strangest stories in all of scripture. I'll give you a little background:

From the time of Adam and Eve a promise was given: a descendant would come from Adam and Eve who would save the world from sin. (Genesis 3:16)

Because all of humanity was wrapped up in the progeny of Adam and Eve, you could say that this promised "seed" of Adam traveled from generation to generation - no one knowing exactly when He would be born.

In other words, the seed of the Savior to come was passed to Seth, the 3rd son of Adam and Eve, but not to Cain or Abel. Then Seth passed that

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promised seed along to his son, and so on, and eventually Noah passed that promised seed along to his son Shem, and so on, then eventually Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and now, one of Jacob's 12 sons has that seed.

That son is Judah. No one knows this yet - but God knows. But in Chapter 38 there's a problem. Judah had married a Canaanite - an idol worshipper - a woman not a believer in the One, True God. He and his wife had 3 sons, but 2 of them were very evil and died before they could produce a son of their own. Did the remaining son carry the promised seed? Hmmmm.....we are sure the Lord would never let the seed die out before the promised Savior came - so...

Chapter 38 is the miraculous but messy story of how the seed in Judah got passed along . It happened because a young woman was determined to survive. She was a believer in the One, True God, and had faith in the ways of God, and demanded her rights...but you may not approve of what she did.

1. :1-5 Who did Judah marry? What are the names of their three sons? What is wrong with this marriage?

This passage in the NKJV (that's the version I use the most) is a little confusing. At first glance you might think that Judah married a woman named Shua. But if you read down the passage to verse 12, you realize that you never really hear the wife's name - she is the daughter of a man named Shua.

But the important thing to notice in these 5 verses is that Judah, a son of a father and a grandfather, and a great-grandfather who all had a mighty and powerful faith in the One, True, God, was willing to take a wife from the idol-worshippers who lived around him. She was a Canaanite - a dweller in the land in which Judah lived - but we see no evidence that she was a believer in the One, True God. She was most likely an idol-worshipper

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Why was he open to doing this? We are never told his thinking- but we do know that he and his 9 brothers had just committed a horrible crime against their brother, Joseph. They had thrown him into a cistern and then sold him as a slave to some travelers going to Egypt.

They hid their act by letting their father believe that their brother, Joseph, had been slain by a wild beast. They broke their father's heart in a way that would never heal.

It's just possible that Judah, who would have said he was a believer in the One, True God, simply was overwhelmed by his sin, and was drug deeper and deeper into other sins because of his unwillingness to admit his wrong. That's the power of sin.

It's also possible that Judah up to this point in his life thought he was a believer in the One, True God because he was, after all, a Jew. But maybe he had never actually come face to face with his own sin and realized his utter helplessness to be the person the One, True God expected him to be. Maybe this story is the time he realized he needed faith in the One, True God, not just a good heritage.

Whatever the reason, Judah married a non-believer. They had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.

Just for curiosity, let's ask ourselves: We know (from Genesis 49:8-12) that Judah is the one who is carrying forward the seed of the Messiah to come. So let's ask ourselves...in which of these three sons of Judah (Er, Onan and Shelah) is this seed hidden? Who is carrying forward the seed of the Messiah to come?

Keep reading.

2. :6-10 Who was chosen as the wife of Judah's 1st son, Er? What kind of man was Er? What happened to this marriage? Why would Judah's 2nd son be asked to marry Er's widow? What happened?

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Tamar was the woman chosen for Er. Our passage doesn't tell us for sure whether she is a Canaanite or a Jew. But we do know this: she was a believer in the One, True God. How do we know that? Because as our story progresses we see that she believes in the promises the One, True God has given...in fact...she is willing to stake her life on those promises.

Er was a wicked man. He lived his life in such a way that the Lord had him killed. We don't know if Judah realized how wicked his son was, but the Lord knew, and he saved Tamar from such a wicked husband.

So...what does that tell us so far about our question? Is Er the carrier of the Messiah who was to come? No. He produces no children, and has no future seed to pass on.

Now here is where we, in our culture, have no concept of why this next thing was done. Judah tells his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar and give her children. Tamar, according to God's laws, actually has the right to expect that one of Er's brothers will give her a future. Without a son Tamar has no future. She would simply be a castaway if she was a woman with no prospect for a future husband and no son to take care of her.

But 2nd son, Onan, also is an evil man. He has no desire to fulfill this obligation. He knows that if he and Tamar have a son that son will technically belong to his dead brother, Er, and Onan will get nothing from that son - Tamar will be the one who deserves and gets whatever that son may someday be able to contribute to the family inheritance.

So Onan spends the night with Tamar, as he was ordered to do by his father, but he only pretends to consummate the marriage. He never actually does what is necessary to produce a child.

My heart hurts for Tamar. Her first husband is wicked. Her second husband humiliates her. But somehow she believes even more in the One, True God after this - because she keeps trusting in His promises to solve her problem.

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The Lord kills Onan also.

So...was Onan the son who was carrying the seed of the future Messiah? No.

3. :11 What has happened to Tamar now that she has no husband? Is she still a part of Judah's family? What promise is she holding on to?

There is one son left - Shelah. Judah knows that he owes it to her to provide his third son as a husband, but he is still too young to marry Tamar. So Judah asks Tamar to live again in her father's house, as a widow, and wait for Shelah to be of age.

Tamar believes what her father-in-law, Judah, tells her, and she goes back to her own father's house to wait.

But the passage tells us that Judah is deceiving Tamar. He is afraid that his third son might die also if he is given in marriage to Tamar. He is stalling.

I find it so ugly that Judah had two wicked sons, both killed by God because they were so evil....but somehow Judah had come to the conclusion that the problem was Tamar - somehow his sons simply died because they were married to her. How ridiculous. How unfair. How short-sighted. And didn't Judah even care that his sons were not God-fearers? Was he so wrapped up in his own self-centeredness that he gave no thought to God?

4. :12-14 What is Tamar's plan, and why does she feel that she must do this?

I do admire Tamar. She is not going to curl up in a corner and let life blow over her. She comes up with a plan. Do I admire her plan? Not sure, really. It was messy - not picture perfect in honesty or in morality - but still, God blessed her for her faith in His promise.

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Tamar hears that Judah is helping with sheep-shearing. She knows this is a time when a man just might find a local harlot and have sexual relations with her. She knows where Judah will be and what time of day he might like to meet a local harlot. She dresses up like a harlot, hides her face, and waits by the side of the road for Judah.

She knows by now that Shelah will never be given to her as a husband. She will never have a child. And she is desperate to have a child who will give her a future. She does not want to die. She wants to live. So her plan is to get pregnant by the man who owes her a husband, a child, and a future.

5. :15-18 What does Judah do, and does he realize he is doing it with his own daughter-in-law?

Judah has sex with a woman he thinks is a local harlot. He has no idea it is Tamar. He thinks she is a local harlot somehow associated with idol-worship.

6. :19 What does Tamar do once this act is completed? What do you think she is thinking at this point?

Tamar asks Judah to pay for this harlotry service. She knows he does not have any money on him. Of course he would not carry money in a land where there were thieves around every corner. She knows that he will have to give her something tangible as a pledge that his payment will be sent later. She wants this something tangible as proof of who the father of this baby is.

7. :20-23 When Judah sends the agreed-upon payment to the harlot he had slept with, what happens?

The harlot cannot be found.

8. :24 What is Judah's reaction when he hears that Tamar is pregnant? What does he think has happened?

Judah is outraged when he hears Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law, is pregnant. That must mean she has been fooling around with someone - living

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in sin. He cannot believe she would commit such a sin. He cannot believe she would bring such shame on his family. He knows that God's law gives him the right to have her burned to death for this shameful thing... (interesting that he feels so righteous to call on God's laws and promises now...)

9. :25&26 Does Judah recognize the signet, cord and staff? What does this immediately tell him? Why does he conclude that he was the one at fault?

I can only imagine how white his face turned. How he gasped for breath as he saw the signet, cord and staff which he remembered he had given that harlot 3 or 4 months ago. He knew immediately that Tamar had believed the promises of the One, True God - that she had believed she had the right to demand from him a husband, a child and a future. She was the one who had played the harlot....but he was the one who had sinned. He had withheld from her the thing God had promised her she could have.

10. :27-30 Which child now carries the promised seed? Matthew 1:3.
Ruth 4:12,

Here's the very cool, happy ending. We know the seed of the Messiah to come had not been in Er, nor in Onan. And, apparently, it had not been in Shelah, either.

How do we know that? The twins born to Tamar were the first-born of Judah. He is the father, and they were the first sons born to him. Perez, who was actually going to be the second of the twins born, somehow made it out first, and became the designated inheritor of the fortunes of Judah. But even more important that the first-born idea is that also, later, in the new testament, Jesus' geneology is given, and there we see the name Perez, son of Judah, as the next one in the line of the Messiah.

11. Do you think Tamar realized she was being used of God to keep the promised seed going?

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No. I don't think anyone at that time even realized Judah was the one carrying that seed. The prophecy about him didn't even occur until a few years later - we see it in Genesis 48.

But Tamar was a woman of faith. She knew what the Lord God had promised, and she was willing to act on that. Faith doesn't mean perfect. It means "believe what God says and act on it."

Life is messy sometimes. God is miraculous.