

Genesis 38: Judah and Cain

By
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“It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah.”

-Genesis 38:1

We have been going sequentially through the book of Genesis, but for this study, we are going to skip chapters 36 and 37. I am skipping chapter 36, not because it lacks relevance, but because it is an in depth genealogy of Esau and the land of Seir. Genealogies in the Bible are lengthy lists of family trees. These genealogies are important for historical purposes and were especially significant at the time they were written when God’s plan for redemption was fixed on a particular people group with a particular lineage. For our purposes in the New Covenant, they hold little significance beyond the historic. Some theologians have broken down name meanings contained in the genealogies to point out interesting patterns within the text, some of which have prophetic significance, but for our purposes of studying this book, I will leave those studies to those who have expertly studied these things.

We are also skipping chapter 37, not permanently, since it is a vital chapter, but only for this week mainly because of family service. At the first of every month, we like to have the kids in service with us as we go through the Bible. However, every now and then, we go through a particularly disturbing section of Scripture on the exact Sunday of family service, and this is such an occasion. So in order to avoid this, we are mixing the chapters up from their sequential order (for reasons that will become self-evident in a second) and we will study chapter 38 this week, and chapter 37 for family service.

So that we aren’t lost though, I will give a brief summation of chapter 37 and chapter 38 before we discuss the main points of chapter 38. We find at the start of chapter 37 that Jacob had been favoring one of his sons, Joseph, due to Jacob’s older age at the time of having Joseph, Jacob’s favoring of Joseph’s mother, (Rachel), and some pretty impressive innate abilities that Joseph possessed. All of this made Joseph’s brothers wrathful towards their younger brother and they sought a way to get rid of Joseph. In chapter 37 they are presented with such an opportunity when they are out in the wilderness and see Joseph coming to check on them. They beat him, throw him in a pit and prepare to kill him, but through the counsel of Judah, they decide instead to sell him into slavery and tell their father that he was killed by a wild animal.

However, instead of improving matters in their home, Jacob slips into a deep depression, leaving his home even more unstable and unwelcoming than it had been with Joseph in a favored position. There is also indication from the start of this chapter that Judah was blamed by the other brothers for this reversal of fortune (since it was his plan that exiled Joseph to slavery) causing Judah to exile himself from his own family and move into a different tribe. While he is living there, he takes a wife from the people of this tribe and raises three sons. The first of these sons is married to a woman named Tamar, but is deemed so wicked by God that he is struck dead.

The second son was culturally bound to marry Tamar and raise a son in his brother's name, but he refuses this call and is also struck dead. Judah falsely assumes that Tamar must be cursed in some way and schemes to keep his youngest son from marrying her by telling her that his son is too young to marry her and that she has to wait for him to grow old enough. However, when Tamar learns of his deception, she tricks Judah into sleeping with her by posing as a prostitute. But while disguised, she gets Judah to give her his signet cord and staff, (which in the ancient world were similar to giving someone your Driver's License and credit card).

After she becomes pregnant by Judah, Judah, still unaware that he had fathered this child, thinks that she had deceived him by having sex with another man without waiting for his son to mature. He demands that she be burned to death, until Tamar reveals Judah's signet cord and staff, showing that he was the father. In a strange turn of events, Judah repents from his sin, and agrees to father the twin boys that come from his union to Tamar. And in an even more strange reality, one of the boys, Perez, becomes the ancestor of King David, and later, Jesus Himself.

So, while this chapter starts off in a fairly depressing manner, we can see through the story of Judah, the severe consequences of sin, as well as the redemption of a man who has completely lost their path.

The Consequences of Sin

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."

-Galatians 6:7-8

The strange, and almost infuriating thing, about this chapter is how it seems that Judah and his brothers got away with their abduction of their brother. After all, they successfully kidnapped him and sold him into slavery without the slightest judicial

consequence. In fact, even though their betrayal of their brother results in Joseph becoming the ruler of Egypt and saving the family from a famine. After they are reconciled, no physical consequence comes upon the brothers.

This story is unfortunately a fairly accurate depiction of reality. It is all too rare that the guilty are rightly punished and the innocent rightly vindicated. Oftentimes, the guilty get away with their wrong doing, and the innocent never see justice done on this earth. As we have spoken of before, while followers of God have a responsibility to seek justice upon the earth, we do so knowing that, unfortunately, perfect justice will never be done upon this earth, and all too often, no earthly justice will be found.

While we can have a level of consolation knowing that God will eventually balance all the books and judge every amount of injustice in this world, it is still unsettling that many vile crimes will go unpunished on the earth. However, from passages like the one above we can know that this depressing thought is not entirely true. God has created the universe in accordance with His holy nature. This means that every sin goes against the very fabric of reality and therefore will always be met with severe natural consequences. So while the laws of this world are meant to reflect this natural and divine order so that our communities are just and social structures are sound, even if we fail to do this, God's order will always administer consequences to those who sin against it.

This is an idea that is brilliantly explored in Dante Alighieri's poem "The Divine Comedy". The "Comedy" is broken into three distinctive parts that, in some sense, masquerade as a prophetic vision of life after death, but in reality they symbolize the consequences of behavior, both good and bad, and helps us understand how these consequences might extend into eternity. So the first part of the poem explores the "Inferno", or Hell, and is an explanation of the negative consequences of sin. The second part explores "Purgatory" and acts as an exploration of repentance, and the final part explores "Paradise" and explains the natural good consequences of virtue.

For the sake of this paper though, the first part of the poem has Dante explore the depths of Hell, as he faces increasingly destructive consequences of worse and worse sins as he moves through the "circles" of Hell until he makes it into the final and lowest part of Hell. This final "circle" represents the absolute depths of depravity and houses the worst sinners of all time like Judas and even Satan himself. In Dante's conception, this particular circle is reserved for those who committed the sin of betrayal. This sin has removed them so far from the light of God, that they exist in eternal ice and torment and can only weep in torment and isolation. It is this depiction that I want to explore in relation to Judah, because as we know, it is this same sin of betrayal that Judah is guilty of.

Bitterness and Blame

“And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.”

-Genesis 4:3-8

Like Cain before him, Judah’s betrayal of his brother was born from his jealousy and resentment for Joseph. While Judah has a slightly better excuse for his bitterness than Cain, considering that Cain’s rejection was completely just, while Judah’s rejection seems to have, at least some, layers of injustice to it. However, in spite of the unjust nature of Jacob’s favoritism, Judah has made the same mistake as Cain and focused his bitterness towards his superior brother and murdered his ideal as opposed to learning from him. We will explore the dynamics of this misplaced resentment in next week’s study, but for the purposes of this study, let’s instead explore the Hell that we create for ourselves when we give into our lowest emotions of bitterness and resentment.

“Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret - it only causes harm. For evildoers shall be cut off. But those who wait on the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.”

-Psalm 37:8

The truth that we are taught throughout Scripture is that there is really no force more potent and destructive as the force of bitterness. Bitterness is as caustic to our souls as poison is to our bodies, and the more we are consumed by our bitterness, the less we are in control of ourselves. In the “Inferno” Dante meets one of these miserable inhabitants of the lowest pit of Hell and finds to his amazement that he is speaking to a man who he knows for certain to be alive upon the earth. When he expresses his confusion he is told that this man had so committed himself to bitterness and jealousy that he had become “possessed” by these sins and no longer had any autonomy over his person other than to suffer for his sin.

If you spend any time speaking with someone who is consumed with bitterness, they lack almost all resemblance to their former self. In the place of vibrancy, joy, love, and

hope, they now only have the ability to relive past upsets to their fortune and a constant list of injuries performed by those who they blame for their fate. And the more that they blame others, the more embroiled they become in the fires of their very own torment. I think that the “Big Book” written by Alcoholics Anonymous has some pretty good insight into this issue of bitterness and blaming. Considering that many people who are consumed by a habit of alcoholism are stuck in that behavior due to their incredible bitterness towards the unfairness of the world. In the midst of their bitterness, a strange delusion begins to form, telling the bitter person that if only things went their way, then they would finally find cause to be happy. In this deluded state, they become slaves of their own “self-will”:

“The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good. Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful. In trying to make these arrangements our actor may sometimes be quite virtuous. He may be kind, considerate, patient, generous; even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest. But, as with most humans, he is more likely to have varied traits. What usually happens? The show doesn’t come off very well. He begins to think life doesn’t treat him right. He decides to exert himself more. He becomes, on the next occasion, still more demanding or gracious, as the case may be. Still the play does not suit him. Admitting he may be somewhat at fault, he is sure that other people are more to blame.”

-“The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous”

The true brilliance of this quote is not just in the incisive way that it describes this universal problem of resentment and self-will, but also in how it makes it clear that this is not always the problem of egotism or selfishness. Someone who is trying to be virtuous and kind can make the same error and experience the same negative consequence. I would even say that the temptation of the virtuous person to fall into this trap is even greater than the temptation of the selfish person. The selfish person may wallow in their delusion since every person wants to see themselves as the hero of their own story; but they can only remain in this delusion if they are able to convince themselves that their clearly selfish actions are actually virtuous in some sense. And the more selfish our behavior, the more difficult this self-delusion will become.

However, for the moral person, their self-will is masked by their seeming virtue and self-sacrifice. And therefore, their bitterness and blame seem much more warranted and can be that much more difficult to identify and address. I would even say that for a person like this, the only way to notice the wrongness of their behavior is to notice the symptoms of this underlying bitterness. But regardless of whether the problem is driven by selfishness or virtue, the result is the same. An incessant bitter complaint about the unfairness of the world that consumes our hope and joy. The “Big Book” elaborates on this terrible consequence later on:

“The first thing apparent was that this world and its people were often quite wrong. To conclude that others were wrong was as far as most of us ever got. The usual outcome was that people continued to wrong us and we stayed sore. Sometimes it was remorse and then we were sore at ourselves. But the more we fought and tried to have our own way, the worse matters got. As in war, the victor only seemed to win. Our moments of triumph were short-lived. It is plain that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness. To the precise extent that we permit these, do we squander the hours that might have been worth while.”

-“The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous”

Isolation

“So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. “When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth.”

-Genesis 4:11-12

Like the curse of Cain, the person who is stuck in their sin will find themselves isolated. Judah has already been cut-off from his family, but he ends up losing two of his sons to his failure, and more than this, we can see that he is alone in his paranoia. As stated before, when his sons die, he immediately assumes that Tamar is to blame and tricks her into thinking that his youngest son is not old enough to marry. Later on in the story, he sleeps with Tamar while she is veiled and impregnates her. When he finds that she is pregnant, this is her response:

“And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry.” So Judah said, “Bring her out and let her be burned!”

-Genesis 38:24

Even though Judah was the one who was deceiving Tamar, and he was also very flippant in sleeping with a random prostitute, he is all too quick to respond with

venomous wrath towards her indiscretion. He doesn't just demand her death, but he demands one of the harshest forms of capital punishment, publicly burning her alive.

"The liar's punishment is, not in the least that he is not believed, but that he cannot believe anyone else."

-George Bernard Shaw - "The Quintessence of Ibsenism"

As the quote from Shaw tells us, Judah's sins have consumed him to the point that he projects all of his worst aspects onto other people. It seems as though the most deceptive people are also the most paranoid of deception. They have emptied themselves of goodness and virtue, and therefore can't even conceive of goodness in others. This is why Jacob's sons do not have close relations with one another.

While they were united in their hatred of Joseph, they can't trust one another for anything besides that. They have shown a casual disrespect for all normal rules of civility, like Reuben sleeping with one of Jacob's wives in Genesis 35, Simeon and Levi massacring a neighboring tribe under a pretense and taking all their women and children as captives in Genesis 34, and now in the betrayal of their own brother in Genesis 37. These men have a track record for disrespecting all standards and rule, and therefore it is no wonder why they can't trust anyone, least of all one another. This is an effect that the psychologist Carl Jung witnessed:

"As soon as man was capable of conceiving the idea of sin, he had recourse to psychic concealment—or, to put it in analytical language, repressions arose. Anything that is concealed is a secret. The maintenance of secrets acts like a psychic poison which alienates their possessor from the community."

-Carl Gustav Jung - "Modern Man in Search of a Soul"

What Jung observed is the very same thing that we can see in this story. We run away from the consequences of our own behavior, and like Adam and Eve before us, we would rather cover over our indiscretion than face the consequences of what we have done. However, whatever means that we use to cover our failure will only serve as a psychic poison to ourselves and cut us off from our community in distrust for our fellow man. To put it more simply, if we can't even be honest with ourselves, how can we expect honesty from anyone else?

Unconsciousness

"Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden."

-Genesis 4:16

We are told that after Cain is rebuked by God, he finds himself wandering in the land of “Nod”. The term “Nod” has relations both to a Hebrew term that means “wandering” as well as our English word “nod” which relates to sleep or unconsciousness, for instance when we say that we are “nodding off”. What this means, is that beyond Cain and Judah being victimized by their own wrath and bitterness, their incessant blaming has also made them unconscious to reality. This takes on a couple different dimensions that we will discuss. The first being they can’t understand what they actually want, and the second is that they are becoming increasingly blind to their own faults.

Beyond Happiness

“Destruction and misery are in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known.”
-Romans 3:16-17

In one sense, we can say that both Judah and Cain are victims of their own success. No one forced them to betray their brothers, and it’s not as though they failed in their pursuit, their biggest problem is that they succeeded. However, what they both learned is that even though they got what they wanted, the result was not the joy they were seeking, but more misery.

When a person is deluded by their own bitterness, the great tragedy is that they actually believe they know what would be good for them. Drowning in the misery of their own resentment, they reach desperately for solutions designed to lift them out of the mire, only to find that with each success, they are more miserable. In this way, the embittered person is not that different from the person who is consuming alcohol.

“And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit...”
-Ephesians 5:18

Paul tells us that the dissipation, another word for emptiness and vanity, is not caused by someone failing to get the drink that they long for, but actually from their success. Unfortunately, in the grip of addiction, the alcoholic can’t fully understand this and instead of becoming disillusioned by alcohol, they become more desperate for the little bit of pleasure that their drink does contain. In the same way, Judah is shown as a man who seeks pleasure and happiness, but is made more miserable through his success and not through his failure.

When he travels to this new land, he seems to be fairly successful in all his endeavors:

“It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him.”

Genesis 38:1-5

Upon arrival, he enters into a partnership with a faithful friend named Hirah, then he marries a woman named Shua and has three sons with her. He then names his sons Er, (which ironically means “awake”, Onan, (“strong”), and Shelah (meaning “petition”, probably meaning that his birth was an answer to prayer). However, in spite of all this fortune, we are told that Judah dwells in a land called “Chezib” which means “false” in Hebrew. From the rest of the chapter we can see that Judah is certainly not happy in this life that he has built for himself, and based on the rage he later experiences for Tamar, that he is still feeling guilty for his betrayal of his brother. So we can interpret his choice of dwelling as either a “false” happiness, or a happiness built on falsehood, either way, it is clear that no amount of success actually solves Judah’s deeper problems.

Beyond Repentance

“Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him. And Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother.” It’s ironic that Judah’s son is killed for failing to give proper honor to his brother, and yet Judah was allowed to live even after selling his own brother into slavery. It is also interesting that Tamar doesn’t seem to be free to remarry anyone but one of these brothers. But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother’s wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the LORD; therefore He killed him also. Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father’s house till my son Shelah is grown.” For he said, “Lest he also die like his brothers.” And Tamar went and dwelt in her father’s house.”

-Genesis 38:6-11

Beyond this, amidst all this success, Judah’s family is deeply dysfunctional. By another stroke of good fortune, Judah actually finds a virtuous woman named Tamar to marry his firstborn. But his son is so wicked that God actually strikes him dead. As we have gone through the book of Genesis, we have seen many wicked and terrible people, none of them have been singled out to be killed by God. Certainly we have seen God

judge cities and civilizations like in the flood or Sodom and Gamorrah, but this is the first time that God has struck down an individual for their sin. So, while we are not told what Er's sin was, we can reasonably assume that his behavior had to have been severe.

After Er's death, Onan was honor-bound to bear a son in the name of his elder brother. This is a practice that seems to be pretty old, but is also recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy as an actual law for the Israelites:

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. "And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. "But if the man does not want to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders, and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to raise up a name to his brother in Israel; he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.' "Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. But if he stands firm and says, 'I do not want to take her,' "then his brother's wife shall come to him in the presence of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, spit in his face, and answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house.' "And his name shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal removed.'"

Deuteronomy 25:5-10

The purpose of this law was to deal with land inheritance in the ancient world. As we have already discussed, the firstborn son inherits the majority of his father's wealth and land at the point of his father's death. He also inherits leadership within the family and responsibility to the others. This responsibility towards inheritance and family is heavily emphasized in the Bible, to such an extent that if a son refused to take on this responsibility, he was publicly shamed in that rather humorous ritual described in the verses above. So when Onan "emitted on the ground", this wasn't a sexual sin per se, but instead a sin against his family, a betrayal of his brother's legacy. To put it more simply, Onan wanted his brother's birthright and didn't want to produce an heir that could lay claim to what he wanted.

The irony of this event should not have been lost on Judah, but unfortunately for him it was. Instead of considering his sons to be at fault for what happened, Judah immediately assumes that Tamar is the cause of their deaths and keeps his youngest from marrying her. This is the other half of unconsciousness. Not only are we blind to what will make us happy, we will also be blind to our own faults.

*“The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble.”
Proverbs 4:19*

Though Judah is experiencing reversals in fortune, these reversals are not unjust curses from God, or the conspiracies of other people, but his own failures as a parent and the extreme sins of his sons. Although not every fault of a child can rightly be laid upon a parent, for Judah to be this blind to his sons' wickedness shows us that he is at the very least a bad father for being unaware of his sons' problems, but at the worst, complicit in their sins. When we choose to blame others and give into resentment, our conscience will become cold and unresponsive and we will no longer be able to repent.

This is one of the greatest dangers of the current culture that we are a part of. We are taught from a very young age that everything wrong with us is the fault of something else. We are either victims of some mental illness, or we are the victims of trauma perpetrated by others. None of our bad behavior is actually our fault, and therefore we find the path forward, not by seeing our own faults, but by identifying the faults of others. But this is completely antithetical to what the Bible teaches us.

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

-Matthew 7:3-5

This passage is not teaching us that everything negative that happens to us is our fault, notice that Jesus says that there indeed might be a “speck” in our brother's eye. However, what we are taught is that we won't be able to correctly see what is wrong with our brother, if we haven't first dealt with ourselves. This is clearly shown in Judah. While Judah had cause for anger in his home, because he lacked the courage to examine his own faults and inadequacies, he laid the totality of the blame at his brother's feet, when in reality he should have been primarily angry at himself and his father. But he couldn't do this because he craved the approval of his father and was unwilling to face the superiority of his brother.

In a similar way, the person who hasn't adequately dealt with themselves has no clear vision to deal with the injustices of others. This is unfortunately a sin of the modern psychological community. When someone goes in for therapy, they will spend hours examining the source of their behavior, usually looking for things done to them and examining their various bad examples and traumatic experiences. It's not that I am

opposed to doing this, but it is almost always done in the wrong order. First, someone must learn to confront themselves, then they can learn to confront the world.

It reminds me of the recent movie “Woman of the Hour” directed by Anna Kendrick. This movie tells the true story of a brutal serial killer and rapist named Rodney Alcala who was so brazen that he went on a dating show and won a date with a contestant. In the film though, Kendrick made the decision to focus almost exclusively on the women who were victimized by Alcala and never delved into his psyche. This struck many modern movie-goers as strange because we live in an age that is obsessed with true crime stories and the psychology of killers. When questioned about this, Kendrick tried to articulate her reasoning in a sophisticated way, but in reality, her real reason was that she found that Rodney Alcala was a fairly boring individual. He amounted to little more than a spoiled child who always got his way at home, and then extended this narcissistic drive into the way he pursued women.

Kendrick saw the same truth that we find in Scripture, evil is actually not very complex and doesn’t need an incredible explanation for its existence. We live in a very dangerous and unjust world filled with sin and corruption. We don’t need an overly complex explanation for why we act in the sinful and vile ways that we do, more often than not, our bad behavior is no more sophisticated and nuanced than the bad behavior of an infant, and boils down to bad impulse control and a misguided idea of what would make us happy. What needs explanation and nuance is goodness. While selfishness is rather self explanatory, self-sacrifice is something that should move us to awe and wonder. It is no great mystery why Judah became resentful of his brother, but what should cause us to wonder is why Joseph was so good in such a dysfunctional family.

In the same way, an over-analysis of our bad behavior is, mostly, a waste of time. We don’t need an extensive explanation for why we do the bad things that we do, we need wisdom and nuance to learn how to do better. But our modern methodology locks people in their self-deception and gives them constant ammunition to dredge up past resentments that they ought to be bitter of and to meditate on their own feelings of sadness and anxiety. While again, a minor amount of this can be useful, it only becomes useful when we have learned from ourselves what the path forward should look like.

This becomes more clear when we think about our conscience. There are some people, like Judah and Cain, who use blame to avoid any personal accountability. While other people have such a brutal conscience that any amount of guilt sends them into a pit of despair and self-loathing. Neither of these attitudes can actually produce the transformation that we are looking for which is only found in repentance.

“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.”

-2 Corinthians 7:10

The person who repents is the one who has found both knowledge of their sin, and knowledge of the way forward. That is why Paul tells us the sorrow over sin produces repentance, and repentance leads us to salvation. The selfish person who refuses to look at their own sin lacks sorrow, whereas the person who can only fixate on their failure lacks hope of salvation. Or to put it another way, they lack the assurance that things can actually be better. But the person who puts these things together can actually move forward and fundamentally change what is broken within them through their relationship with God. But the person who doesn't learn this will be stuck in their unconscious state. They will continue to find tragedy and unhappiness within their life, but they will lack the wisdom to do anything about it.

“Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.”

-1 Corinthians 14:20

Redeeming the Bitter Soul

“And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry.” So Judah said, “Bring her out and let her be burned!” When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “By the man to whom these belong, I am with child.” And she said, “Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff.” So Judah acknowledged them and said, “She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son.” And he never knew her again.”

-Genesis 38:24-26

The fascinating thing about this story though, is that while it starts at a dark point, what this story is actually about is the redemption of Judah. This is an important point to meditate on, and it should give us incredible hope as parents. Even though Judah had gone about as bad as someone could go, he was not beyond redemption, but this redemption occurs in one of the most bizarre ways imaginable. One would think that redemption might happen in Judah's life through an encounter with a wise prophet, an angel, or even a conversation with his father, but instead he is redeemed through a trick.

We are not to interpret these events as a justification of Tamar's behavior, after all she did dress as a prostitute and seduce her father-in-law. Instead this is a picture of just how far Judah had sunk himself. He was so far apart from the grace and glory of God that he was not open to the rebuke of a righteous person, but instead he was only open to the rebuke of someone lower than himself.

Judah was the son of a wealthy man who had a direct relationship with God, and a promise that his family would inherit all the surrounding territory. Beyond that, Judah's family was given a higher morality than any of the surrounding nations, and yet Judah had sunk so low that he had committed crimes that even the pagan nations around him would have been appalled by his behavior. And in fact, the daughter of a pagan nation, who did deceive him and slept with him under false pretenses, still acted *more* righteous than he did. This is similar to Abraham and Isaac being rebuked by pagan rulers when they lied about their wives, but it is also shown when God allows for pagan nations to judge His own people.

“Look among the nations and watch—Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days Which you would not believe, though it were told you. For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation Which marches through the breadth of the earth, To possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves.”

-Habakkuk 1:5-7

The prophets of God were astounded that the pagan nations would be appointed by God to judge His own people, but this is exactly what God had intended. The reason for this is simple, if they would not listen to the voice of His prophets, then perhaps they would be shaken out of their complacency when they were ashamed by their enemies. This is a key lesson for us as parents. When our children get to a certain age, they no longer respond directly to sound rebuke, they can't be talked out of their behavior, nor can they be reasoned into virtue. The only hope that they have is if they learn the hard way from the consequences of their own behavior, and this will often take a radical form.

“Your own wickedness will correct you, And your backslidings will rebuke you. Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing That you have forsaken the LORD your God, And the fear of Me is not in you,” Says the Lord GOD of hosts.”

-Jeremiah 2:19

When God tells His people that their “own wickedness will correct you...” this is exactly what He means. As parents, we are clearly responsible to teach our kids the right lessons, and if we have failed to do that, it is never too late to start. But, at a certain

age, words don't have the same effect, we have to learn the hard way through natural consequences. This is why in the parable of the prodigal son, the father lets his son go, even though he knows that his son is being disrespectful and wicked in his request. As parents we can't protect our children from the natural consequences of their sin, because in these consequences is their only real hope of repentance.

The reason for this is actually quite simple. As long as the parent involves themselves in their child's life, usually against their rebellious child's will, they have allowed themselves to be the target of their child's blame. As long as Judah was in his father's house, he could always blame the legitimate failures of his father for his own misery. It is only in his own home, surveying the real damage he had done to his own family, that Judah was finally free to see his own faults.

Even in this instance, he could have looked at Tamar's deception and murdered her for making him look foolish, but thankfully he had enough sense not to do that. Instead he finally did the thing that he had been avoiding all his life, he looked at the faults of his own character and confessed them.

This is legitimately the hardest thing that any of us will be asked to do. Remember in Eden after the fall, the immediate response of Adam and Eve was to cover over their shame, flee from consequences, speak out of self-pity, and finally to blame everyone but themselves for their predicament. This impulse has been passed down to all of us and plagues everyone who gives into it. No matter how we deal with our shame, whether it is through punishing ourselves through self-pity and humiliation, trying to "fix" our mistake without confessing it, blaming others, or ignoring it altogether, these are all equivalent expressions of the same negative impulse and they will all have the same result, we will be prevented from true change.

Judah here sees his mistake, confesses his wrong, and then seeks to make amends with the woman that he wronged. While this is still not a complete repentance, since his greater wrong was to his father, but eventually God provides a means where Judah can make amends for that wrong-doing as well. This story by no means represents the fullness of Judah's redemption, but it does show his first steps. And for all of us who are in Christ, this is exactly what we are called to do.

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

-1 John 1:8-9

While this is still something that I battle with, there was a point in my life when I was almost incapable of acknowledging my wrong. In a weird way, this is one of the more ignoble reasons why I wanted to join the military. Deep down, I think I was looking for an excuse for my bad behavior. I wanted something tragic to point to that justified my bitterness and unhappiness. I didn't want a way out of my pain, I wanted to sink deeper into it. Although there were a slew of legitimate things that were unjustly done to me, until I was willing to confront my own part in my misery, I was unable to move forward, or to begin to forgive the wrongs done to me. While confronting our own sin is one of the more difficult things we are called to do, it is also one of the things that will provide us the most freedom and hope.

"Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. "And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

-John 8:31-36