

Sermon – 20/06/2004 pm

Be Holy

Study Text: Genesis 38

Year ago as I was getting off the plane in Europe, I was confronted by this large, brightly-lit advertisement on the wall in front of me. It was for perfume or something, but it featured scantily clad women. Having been in India for some years I was taken aback at this rude poster. Later I picked up a paper and there on the inside page was another explicit photograph of a woman. I wondered for a while what sort of place this was. What sort of country and culture had I come to?

Jacob and his family were living in Canaan and they were confronted not only by idolatry but also by the immorality of the Canaanite people. They were a wicked people whom God was preparing for punishment. *The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached full measure* (15:16). Living among these people was a challenge for Jacob and his family whom God had chosen as a special people for himself.

We have already seen what happened back at Shechem. The locals took Jacob's daughter and sexually abused her. It was not a big deal for them. 'Hey come and live among us and we can intermarry' they said. We are open minded, friendly people. Danger Jacob, danger. With the red lights flashing God spoke to Jacob and told him get up and get out of here. Go to Bethel, dwell there and worship me there.

This chapter interrupts the story of Joseph for a short while. But it is not simply here for that purpose. It has important lessons for us and is historically very important – so we must not skip over it.

Separation and Purity

Judah departed from his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. Why is the focus suddenly turned to Judah? We will find out by the end of the chapter. But this is the genealogy or history of Jacob remember, so his son Judah can take his place. His place is very important as we will see.

Judah departed from his family to stay with this Canaanite fellow. Does this remind you of anyone? That word 'depart', or 'separate', gives us a clue – as well as signalling danger. Lot separated from Abraham and went to dwell on the plain near the pagan city of Sodom. Judah departed from his family to dwell with Hirah.

And next thing he has married a Canaanite woman – the daughter of Shua. Without approval from his father, and in disobedience to the command of God, he married a foreigner, a heathen Canaanite. Indications are that he lusted after her- just as he lusted after the 'harlot' later on. He had three sons in quick succession – Er, Onan and Shelah. In Hebrew Er is in fact the word for evil spelt backwards.

Judah's sons by his Canaanite wife turn out to be so wicked that God put them to death. Judah arranged for Er to marry Tamar, another Canaanite we presume. But before they have any children the wickedness of Er was such that the Lord killed him. We are not told the nature of his wickedness but in the context of this chapter it could be assumed that it was some sexual perversion.

His brother Onan was then called upon to marry Er's widow, under the system of Levirate (a Latin word) or brother-in-law marriage. This form of marriage was designed to perpetuate the line of each male in the clan- his name and his inheritance. It became part of the law of Israel (Deuteronomy 25), and is exemplified in the story of Ruth (Ruth 4:5). It is still practiced in Africa today.

Onan, however, did not fulfil his responsibilities in this regard. Every time he went into Tamar he *emitted on the ground* or spilled his seed. He did not want to give an heir to his brother. He wanted all the inheritance to himself and his own offspring. What he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord. It had nothing to do with masturbation as is often thought – check your dictionary where you will find the sin of Onanism. He was in fact being selfish and disobeying the command of the Lord. Such wickedness brought the wrath of God. The Lord killed Onan also.

With two sons who had contact with Tamar dead, Judah was reluctant to give his third son to her as custom demanded. Shelah was too young anyway, but Judah did promise Tamar that he would give him to her when he had grown up. She was told to remain a widow until then. This meant that Shelah was actually betrothed to her.

But the years went by and this son grew into a man. Tamar wanted to be married and have children but she waited and waited and nothing happened. Judah was not sticking to his promise. In the mean time his wife died. Then Tamar decided to take things into her own hands.

Tamar Tricks Judah

Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and went to sit by the road on the way to Timnah. She went because she heard Judah was going that way. She planned to trap Judah and force his hand in doing what he promised. Even though Judah later declared *she is more righteous than I*, what she did was in no way right – it was relative not absolute righteous. There is little righteousness to be found in this tragic family story.

It was shearing time, a time for feasting and drinking; so Judah decided to go up to his men at Timnah. In the Canaanite cult it was a time for ritual fornication as fertility magic. His Canaanite friend Hirah was still around. Judah put himself in a morally dangerous situation.

Judah saw this prostitute sitting by the road and unable to control his lust he went in to her. In the immoral transaction Tamar managed to get his personal seal and cord as well as his distinctive staff as a pledge for payment. It was as if she had his license and credit cards. Judah was acting just like the fool described in Proverbs 5.

He sent Hirah to collect his pledge but this prostitute was no where to be found. He spoke as if she was a shrine prostitute but no one knew about her. Judah decided it was time to save face and accepted the loss of his personal items. He did not want to be shamed before others. He knew that what he did was wrong but little did he know that his sin would shortly be found out and he would be shamed into repentance.

Although living in her father's house, Judah was the one responsible for Tamar. He had shown little interest in her until now when told that she was pregnant. Being in effect betrothed to Shelah she was guilty of adultery and Judah called for her to be brought out and burned to death. Stoning was the usual method of execution but the daughters of priests were burned for adultery (Leviticus 21:9).

Judah condemned her as a sinner and called for her punishment. But Tamar revealed that he was the one who had got her pregnant. *Let him who is without sin cast the first stone* said Jesus in a scene very similar to what we find here. That story of the woman caught in adultery is in John 8. Judah had to admit his sin which he had tried to cover up all this time. Not just his sexual immorality but his failure to honour the promise he made to Tamar to give her his son Shelah.

It is hard to find any heroes of faith in this chapter. It is much like ch.34 when Jacob camped near Shechem. Canaanite culture, indeed the cult of idol worship, hedonism and associated sexual immorality, presented a grave danger to the chosen people of YHWH. Two sons of Judah came under the wrath of God for their wickedness, for things that were probably acceptable in that culture but were abhorrent to God. His daughter-in-law turns to prostitution in order to solve her problems. And Judah, the son of Jacob, while celebrating with his Canaanite friends, succumbs to lust or sexual temptation.

Judah departed from the people of God. That is a dangerous thing to do – still today. People make all sorts of excuses for not coming to church or the fellowship of Gods people. Soon you find them being involved in the things of the world. Where are they – watching TV or with unbelieving friends. When their souls are not fed from the Word of God nor encouraged by fellowship with Gods people, then they will be fed from what the world offers. The Canaanite culture, like our own humanistic culture, was ever ready to satisfy the lusts of the flesh.

Remember Lot at Sodom. Remember Jacob at Shechem. Remember Judah in Adullam. And you may remember friends or even yourself in times of wandering away. Let us continue in prayer and in meeting together. *Be holy as I am holy* says the Lord. May our times together build us up in our precious and holy faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we might stand firm against the persistent and powerful attack of a morally corrupt culture.

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