

The record of Judah's sins in Genesis 38

by: Hugo Bouter

'It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers'

Genesis 38:1

This chapter comes as an interval in the history of Joseph, who was sold to Egypt by his brothers. In fact, they had intended to kill him, but Judah advised them not to do so but to sell him to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:26-27). But in the presence of his father, Judah did not denounce the wrong actions of his brothers. In Genesis 38 we see how he departed from his brothers to pursue his own way. Perhaps he wanted to earn a living and be wholly independent.

1. Departing from the brethren

In a spiritual sense, the departure from his brothers was not profitable for him at all. According to Psalm 133:1, it is good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity. In the light of the New Testament, going out from among the children of God is the characteristic feature of an 'antichrist' (1 John 2:19). Some translations have Judah 'go down' in verse 1, like in later times Jonah went down on the path that led him away from the presence of the Lord.

2. Do not love the world

The result of Judah's actions was that he entered into marital bonds with a corrupt and idolatrous world. He married the daughter of a Canaanite (v. 2), which was in direct opposition to God's will for His chosen people. The Israelites had to live in separation from the Gentiles and they should serve the Lord with an undivided heart. Even today, it occurs that a believer gets unequally yoked together with an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-18). It is quite remarkable that the book of Zechariah ends with the prophetic words, 'In that day there shall no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts' (Zech. 14:21).

3. Wickedness in the sight of the Lord

Judah's offspring did not serve the Lord either. Er, his firstborn, incurred the Lord's displeasure, and the Lord killed him (v. 7). What kind of relationship could there have been between father and son (between Judah and Er)? In any case, God's wrath was aroused by serious sin in the firstborn's life, and in His righteous government He punished it.

The apostle John confirms that there is sin leading to death (1 John 5:16), a sin so serious that restoration has become impossible. The death of his son must have been a heart-felt message for Judah, whose name means: 'he who praises God'.

4. He who does not love his brother abides in death

Then we see how Judah's sons failed in their mutual relationships. As members of God's 'family', we too can fail in our relationships with the brethren, and not live up to our obligations towards them. This is a serious matter indeed, and also leads to death. This happened to Judah's second son, Onan, who died because he refused to comply with the demands of the levirate, the marriage duty of the surviving brother (vv. 8-10).

5. A secret lie

Three other sins of Judah followed, all of them related to his daughter-in-law, Tamar. First, he lied when he told her to remain a widow in her father's house. His intentions were not good (v. 11). God, who knows the hearts and reads the minds of men, had it written down in His Word. Therefore, it is also a warning for us. 'Do not lie to one another' (Col. 3:9). Nothing can remain hidden from God. Alas, this injustice with Tamar was soon followed by even greater sins.

6. Adultery

After the death of Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, he committed adultery with Tamar. Sexual immorality – in this case even incest – is not only a sin against God's command, but also against one's own body which, as we know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:18-20). Sin reduces and degrades man to the level of a brute beast.

7. Hypocrisy

Finally, Judah committed the sin of hypocrisy because he applied a double moral standard. He even wanted

his daughter-in-law to be burned in order to avenge and maintain his honour (v. 24). But the execution of Tamar did not take place, and Judah had to acknowledge that she had been more righteous than he (v. 26). Thereupon he sincerely confessed his sin and refrained from further immorality.

The miracle of divine grace, however, is that both Judah and Tamar and their offspring are mentioned in the book of the genealogy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3). No sin whatsoever is too great to be forgiven, and no repentant sinner whosoever will be sent away by the Saviour empty-handed.