

"THAT WHICH YOU DO IN SECRET..."

by Steve Zeisler

One of the chief responsibilities of a preacher is to make the magnificent treasures of the Bible applicable to a generation thousands of years removed from the events described in Scripture. We will not have much difficulty doing that today. The themes we will look at in Genesis are, unfortunately, quite up to date and very relevant to our modern world. We will look at sexual harassment as a means of exercising power over people. We will discover that political fortunes rise and fall as word of wrongdoing becomes public. Innocent victims are made to suffer; reputations are destroyed; crass hypocrisy is exposed; yet through all this God still accomplishes his saving purposes.

As we continue our series on the lives of the patriarchs of Israel, we come to two incidents that deal with sexual sin and temptation. In the first story, a spiritual leader claiming high moral standards becomes involved in sexual sin, yet he is outraged at the sin of another. The young woman involved is callously victimized by a man of power. But we will find that sexual dalliance does not remain secret. God cannot be mocked. In the second incident, a young man is made to face sexual temptation in its most alluring form. His response is a model for Christians in all generations, yet he is made to suffer punishment.

The first account to be examined in this study concerns an incident in the life of Judah, one of the sons of Jacob. Genesis 38:

And it came about 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 took her and went into her. So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. And she bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

Genesis 12-50 focus on three generations of the patriarchs of Israel. The first generation upon whom the promise of God rested was Abraham's. His son Isaac was the chosen one; then came Jacob, who was the chosen one in his generation. When we come to the fourth generation, however, we find a deviation from the pattern in that all twelve sons of Jacob are chosen; God's program begins to expand so that many more are chosen. We will look in some detail at two of these twelve sons who were to become heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Last week we focused on the life of Joseph; and today his brother Judah becomes the focus of Genesis 38.

We have already encountered in the lives of the patriarchs similar circumstances to those that we find in these verses. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had each discovered the Lord's concern for their decisions in choosing a place to live, finding a wife to marry, bearing and raising children, and in determining an appropriate way to relate to their Canaanite neighbors.

But in Genesis 38:1-5 there is an absence of any mention of God playing a part in Judah's decision to first, strike out on his own, to befriend and go into business with a man named Hirah, and then to marry a Canaanite woman. We also see that there was no reference to the Lord in the naming of the children of this union. Judah and his wife take on that task themselves, Judah naming the first child and his wife the next two. Neither does Judah build any altars; he does not utter a single prayer; he does not ask God for guidance—all of this despite the fact that he was one of the chosen of God, a vessel of God's salvation plan. The absence of any obvious communication with his Lord with regard to these many decisions may explain, as we will see, why Judah was open and vulnerable to sexual temptation and sin. He was vulnerable because his everyday life had very little to do with God. He had no

urgent sense of the Lord being involved in either the critical or mundane details of daily living.

That, unfortunately, is not unusual among many Christians today. Some who call themselves Christians—they have a Christian background and Christian perspectives on many issues—act in the same way Judah acted here. They go about their daily affairs, relying on their own insight and intuition and ignoring what part God would want to play in their lives. I have no doubt that if Judah were asked he would certainly say he was one of the chosen of God; that that was his identity. While he may have thought in those terms, however, he never acted that way. He ran his own affairs. That is why when temptation arose, he succumbed. He had not been in close communication with God on everyday matters in his life.

Judah's story continues in Gen.38:6-11 with his choosing of Tamar as a wife, for his first-born son Er. This man, we read, was "evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord took his life." Tamar was given as a wife to the next oldest son, Onan, but the same fate befell him. Judah calls a halt to the practice here for fear that the next son, Shelah, may end up like his brothers. He instructs Tamar to remain a widow until Shelah is old enough to marry her. Judah had accepted responsibility for Tamar's welfare in her marriage to his first son Er. In that culture, her hope for the future and her standing in the community depended on her having sons who would care for her. So long as she was a childless widow, her life was a dead end. Judah's decision to send her back to her father's house, therefore, was an abdication of his responsibility toward her. We resume the story in Gen.38:12:

Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. And it was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He said, therefore, "I will send you a kid from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?" And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.

When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. And he asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here." So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'" Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this kid, but you did not find her." Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" And Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again.

If Judah were alive today he would probably subscribe to the Wall Street Journal, Sports Illustrated and TV Guide. He would monitor the latest interest rates and keep track of good properties to invest in. He would support the local schools; patronize the fine arts groups; involve himself in revamping city parks; and play golf each weekend with a local council member and the editor of the newspaper. He would be a leading member of the community, one who, although he had inherited a great legacy of faith, still lived a life that was indistinguishable from any other life in the community.

But the problem was, whether Judah believed it or not, or whether he would admit to it or not, he was a hypocrite. He was a hypocrite because he demanded standards of morality from others which he was not prepared to apply to himself. He would actively support the "Just Say No" campaign to stamp out drugs in local communities; he would be concerned with the breakdown in moral standards among young people, and with the dismal ethics of some politicians today. But he would fail to apply these standards of morality to himself. Instead he would rationalize his behavior.

Judah's thought processes probably went something like this: he had recently been widowed, and he had just happened on this prostitute during sheep-shearing season. His circumstances and sexual longings were different than those that led to the kind of immorality that he spoke against. His hypocritical standards, therefore, allowed him to involve himself in what he indignantly condemned in others. He chose casual sex with a woman he thought was a roadside prostitute, yet he was horrified to learn that his daughter-in-law was involved in what appeared to be casual sex with strangers. We can only imagine his shock and dismay on discovering that he was the one whom Tamar was involved with on the day when he chose to act on the "special circumstances" that set him apart from others.

Another mistake Judah made was assuming that what he had done in private, away from home, anonymously, would remain secret. Recent headline events in this country have had one salient effect, and that is, to declare that what is done in secret will not necessarily remain secret. Judah was convinced that his sexual dalliance would remain secret from anyone who counted for anything, but the record of Scripture which we have here before us will forever link his name with this event.

Judah's problem was that his walk with God did not count for very much in his life. He was poorly defended, as a result, when sexual temptation appeared in the form of a nameless prostitute sitting in the gateway of a town far from home.

But, as bad as this story is, there is a hopeful ending. Judah confesses his sin, and recognizes that Tamar is more righteous than he (38:26).

For the first time ever, perhaps, the tough, moralistic, hard-nosed businessman has a taste of what Jesus called a "hunger and thirst for righteousness." He finally came to understand that it was what God thought of his behavior was what really mattered. At last he becomes spiritually sensitive. He recognizes his own need to live righteously, and confesses his failure. And what a hopeful ending there is to this story. Tamar is included in the genealogy of the Messiah. She gave birth to twin boys, one of whom, Perez, became an ancestor of Christ.

Sexual sin, it should be pointed out here, and as is obvious by how this tale ends, is not the unforgivable sin. Failure in this area can always be forgiven. The Lord can even redeem our bad choices if we are like Judah, if we honestly admit to our wrongdoing, allow ourselves to be ministered to, and if we thereafter purpose to seek to live righteously.

Another son of Jacob handles a second incident involving sexual temptation very differently, namely Joseph. This beautiful dreamer had been the bane of his brothers' life and they decided to do away with him. They threw him down into a pit, and then, over dinner, debated as to how they would rid themselves of this nuisance. But first Reuben and then Judah had a twinge of conscience about a plan to kill Joseph. The brothers finally compromised and decided to spare his life, but only because they decided to sell him as a slave. Some Midianite traders beat them to the punch, however—they found Joseph before the brothers returned to the pit and they did the job for them, selling Joseph to some Ishmaelite traders on their way down to Egypt. This slight problem did not deter the brothers, though. They dipped Joseph's varicolored coat in animal blood and convinced Jacob that a wild animal had devoured his favorite son.

Joseph's story is taken up again in chapter 39, following the account of Judah's liaison with his daughter-in-law. A senior officer in Pharaoh's court, Potiphar, bought Joseph from the Ishmaelite traders. Joseph turned out to be quite a bargain for the Egyptian. His slave, as we have already seen, was a genius. Joseph began to make all kinds

of money for his master, so much so that Potiphar gave over the running of his estate to him.

We recall that earlier events in his life showed Joseph to be a trifle proud and arrogant. Gen.39: 2, however, sounds a note that describes Joseph's frame of mind at this stage of his life. The words, "And the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man," is a clue that Joseph increasingly gave the Lord credit for all his successes. He began to see at last that everything he possessed—his talents, his intelligence, his good looks—were his by gift of God; they had nothing to do with his own abilities. One virtue he lacked in his youth, and whose lack served to infuriate his brothers—humility—was at last becoming apparent in this man's life.

So we find Joseph in charge of Potiphar's household. As usual, everything he has set his hand to turned up roses. That is, until the following incident occurred, recorded at Gen.39:7:

And it came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me around, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" And it came about as she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he did not listen to her to lie with her, or be with her. Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. And she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled outside, she called to the men of her household, and said to them, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. And it came about when he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, that he left his garment beside me and fled, and went outside." So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and it happened as I raised my voice and screamed, that he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

Potiphar, the woman's husband, at least partially believed his wife's story and had Joseph thrown into jail. I recently talked with a woman who had suffered a frightful case of sexual harassment by her employer. When she decided to bring him to justice, the trauma involved was just as devastating as the harassment itself. This kind of situation is not at all uncommon in our day. Sex is often linked with power in human affairs. Sexual sin is rarely a result of lust alone overcoming people. Sex is frequently a means of exerting power over someone. Potiphar's wife charged that Joseph intended to "make sport" of her, indicating that her motive, in part at least, was to exercise power over Joseph. Her references to him as a "Hebrew" indicate also that there was a question of racial prejudice here. That for her may have made a liaison with Joseph more exotic. Sexual temptation, therefore, is not confined merely to lust and physical desire. There are all kinds of elements present when sexual temptation arises.

It would be foolish to imagine, therefore, that simple weapons such as a good resolve are adequate to withstand situations like this. Only with the help of God can we avoid falling into sin in these circumstances. In that sense, Joseph was well defended in the face of this temptation. The weapons he had were powerful indeed. What a contrast to Judah, who was poorly defended when he was tempted and succumbed as a result. Joseph had begun to see the grace of God manifested in his life. He had begun to see that he was who he was because of God's hand. And he had a context for refusing the offer of the Egyptian's wife. He knew that his good character was at stake. She was not offering him a pleasurable experience of sex and nothing else. There was much more at stake than that. His testimony to God, his own character and others' trust in him were also at stake. He put the choice to sin or to not sin in the broadest context. His master trusted him. He had been good to him. His good name mattered very much to him. With all of that at stake, Joseph chose to deny himself the offer of a moment's pleasure. He had the insight to know that this was no simple offer of sex; that much more was at stake.

It was sad to see the puzzled look on Gary Hart's face on television recently as he wondered why it mattered to people that he chose to associate himself with an attractive young woman. Some people wondered why that should disqualify him, as President, from dealing with the Russians, for instance. They, and he, failed to see

that character was what was at stake. If someone is willing to break his marriage vows, to deceive those closest to him, why on earth should he be trusted with anything? Joseph knew what was at stake: His Lord's reputation and his own reputation. He asks in Gen.39:9, "How can I do this great evil and sin against God?" That was the point David finally arrived at following his sin with Bathsheba. God himself was the one who had been affronted.

It would be well also to examine the way in which Joseph resisted the temptation presented by Potiphar's wife. Gen39.10: "It came about that she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he did not listen to her to lie beside her, or be with her." Joseph did not toy with the idea, in other words. He did not have a flirtatious conversation with her and then say no. He did not hang around the house wondering if he should or should not. Rather he refused to listen to her or get close to her. He would have nothing to do with her. He cut off the temptation really early on, refusing to fantasize about it, and instead resisted her persuasive powers. What an important lesson this is! When faced with temptation, we must do no less. We must call a halt to the process immediately and refuse to toy with it. That is what Joseph did, and that is why he was able to resist.

Joseph ended up in jail for his pains. There was a time in my life when I imagined that Bible stories all had happy endings—the good guy was supposed to come out ahead and the wicked seductress punished. But that is not what happened in this story. Sexual sin, as is the case with all types of sin, has its innocent victims too. But God does not abandon them, nor did he abandon Joseph. Genesis 39:21 says, "But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him..." Although Joseph was wrongly accused, and suffered as a result, God did not forsake him. He was finally vindicated, and was exalted to the second highest position in the land of Egypt. That would be accomplished through trial and suffering. Sexual sin, therefore, does result in people—in many cases innocent people—being hurt. But when they repent, God will forgive those who have sinned, and he will support those who have been victimized by the sin.

These incidents involving two of Jacob's sons are placed side by side in the book of Genesis for several reasons. Judah's failure suggests the danger of remaining in Canaan. Joseph's suffering and subsequent rise to power set the stage for his family's settling in Egypt to escape the ravages of famine; and in that crucible the family of Jacob became a nation. But the stories of Judah and Joseph are placed back to back for another reason too, and that is, to demonstrate their different responses to temptation to sexual sin. Because of his faltering spiritual walk, Judah was weak and poorly defended when he faced his difficulty. But Joseph's intimate walk with his Lord enabled him to resist temptation and flee it when his hour came. Unlike his brother, he had an adequate defense in a time of trouble.

In the New Testament, Jesus uttered these startling words in the gospel of Luke,

There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed; there is nothing hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light; and whatever you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

If we truly want to walk with the Lord, there is no way that certain areas in our lives will remain hidden from view. We will not succeed in keeping things hidden away and buried from view, running our lives as we please. "Whatever is said in the dark shall be heard in the light." God operates that way for our good.

Also in the New Testament, here are the words of the apostle Paul on the subject of sexual sin, taken from 1 Corinthians 6:15-20:

"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, 'The two shall become one flesh.' But the one who joins himself with the Lord is one spirit with him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been

bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

Sexual choices are always very significant in the Christian life. No matter how anonymous and hidden the sexual liaison is, it is extremely significant because wherever you go, the Spirit of God goes also. There is no such thing as an insignificant sexual liaison. But when temptation comes, that is always how it will be presented: It will be portrayed as no big deal, as merely human, as harmless, as a natural need in life. That kind of thinking holds that sexual sin is harmless; that no one will suffer as a result. But every choice to sin sexually matters very much because your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He does not take days off. He goes with you everywhere you go.

"Flee immorality," Paul says. That is exactly what Joseph did. He did not play around with thinking whether he should or should not. He ran when tempted. That is what we should do in the face of sexual temptation. We must make the choice very early in the process, long before we even begin to toy with the idea. We sometimes hear that temptation to sexual sin is too powerful to say no to, but that is not true. If we cannot say no, it is because we have said yes too many times earlier in the process. We must therefore choose to say no at the beginning, before it is too late to say no.

"Therefore glorify God in your body," concludes the apostle. As believers, we can glorify God in our bodies and in our sexuality. When all is said and done, when we have talked about sexual sin and temptation and the danger of the wiles of sin, we may easily fail to remember that sex is a God-ordained function; that our bodies are good, that they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we have opportunity to use our bodies and our sexuality to glorify God. Righteous sexual expression glorifies him and resistance toward sin glorifies him. Because we are sexual beings, we do not have to be on the defensive, forever fearful that we will be tempted beyond our ability to resist, suspicious of our sexuality and wishing we could be rid of it. None of that is biblical. We can say no to what is wrong and yes to what is right, and God will be glorified through our choices. What a great calling! At day's end we can look back on what we have accomplished in our bodies, and know that God has been glorified.

"I urge you therefore brethren by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

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