

God is in Control

Mt 1:2-16; Gn 38:1-30 (text)

29 August 2021, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am
(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

- Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,
- No doubt, at times many a Christian has been saddened by godlessness in the world – by ungodly decisions made by leaders, politicians; by immorality in society...
- And, sad to say, but at times Christians have also been totally disgusted and downhearted by the unethical behaviour of some respected churchgoers who blasphemed the Name of our God by sins like fraudulent transactions, immorality, adultery, paedophilia, pornography, etc.
- At such times – when someone who professes to be Christian has dragged the Name of God-Triune through the mud, and has tarnished the image of Christianity – it is easy for us to become disheartened and to ask, “But is God still in control?” “Is God real?” “Is He still steering His savings plan to its final end when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?”
- My brother & sister, our text gives us all the reason to keep on trusting that God is still in control of all things and that He *will* bring His savings plan to fulfilment!
- Our text does this by way of three points:
 1. The Sinning Believer
 2. The Sinning Unbeliever
 3. God Nevertheless in Control

The Sinning Believer

- Judah was a believer, a son of Jacob!
- Besides, Judah was leader in the family – one who once, to save Joseph from being killed by his brothers, got the idea to rather sell Joseph to some slave traders!
- Yet, look at the sins of this believer...

¹ With much appreciation for the wonderful work of GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2007. Preaching Christ from Genesis: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. p. 357-377.

- He went and lived with the Canaanites –i.e., with unbelievers!
- Yes, *believer Judah* started a close friendship with a Canaanite man called Hirah from a Canaanite place called Adullam!²
- Next thing, he took for himself a Canaanite wife – the daughter of a Canaanite man called Shua!³
- Thus, Judah went against the desires of his great-grandfather Abraham⁴ and his grandfather Isaac.⁵ I mean, remember how Isaac and Abraham made great effort to get non-Canaanite wives for their sons!?
- But not so Judah! No, he followed exactly in the sinful ways of his uncle Esau who married Canaanite women!⁶
- Well, Judah then had three sons by this unnamed Canaanite woman. She gave him Er,⁷ Onan⁸ & Shelah.⁹

² A Canaanite city in Judah (Jos. 12:15); fortified by Rehoboam (2 Ch. 11:7); mentioned by Micah (Mi. 1:15) and inhabited after the Exile (Ne. 11:30). Identified with Tell esh-Sheikh Madhkur (*Horvat 'Adullam*), midway between Jerusalem and Lachish, the place is usually associated with the cave in which David hid when pursued by Saul (1 Sa. 22:1) (Meiklejohn, J. W. (1996). Adullam. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 17). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press).

³ cf. 1 Chron 2:3 **The sons of Judah:**

Er, Onan and Shelah. These three were born to him by a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua. Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death.

⁴ cf. Gn 24:3 ***I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, ⁴ but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.***

⁵ Gn 28:1-2 ***So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. ² Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother..."***

⁶ See Genesis 36:2-3, ***Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, ³ and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth.***

Also cf. Genesis 28:6-9 (especially v.9) ***Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he commanded him, "Do not marry a Canaanite woman," ⁷ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. ⁸ Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; ⁹ so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had.***

Also cf. Keil & Delitzsch for, "When Esau heard of this blessing and the sending away of Jacob, and saw therein the displeasure of his parents at his Hittite wives, he went to Ishmael—i.e., to the family of Ishmael, for Ishmael himself had been dead fourteen years (p. 175)—and took as a third wife Mahalath, a daughter of Ishmael (called Bashemath in Gen. 36:3, a descendant of Abraham therefore), a step by which he might no doubt ensure the approval of his parents, but in which he failed to consider that Ishmael had been separated from the house of Abraham and family of promise by the appointment of God; so that it only furnished another proof that he had no thought of the religious interests of the chosen family, and was unfit to be the recipient of divine revelation" (Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). [Commentary on the Old Testament](#) (Vol. 1, p. 180). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson) .

⁷ עֵר "Wakey one" (a Qal participle masculine singular of עָרַר "wake up; rouse oneself")

⁸ אֹנָן "Vigorous" from אָנַח "Vigour."

- Then, when Er had grown up, Judah helped also him to a Canaanite wife – a young woman by the name of *Tamar*.
- But then, v.7 says, God killed Er, for he was wicked in the Lord's sight!
- So, Tamar was left a widow! Worse – a widow who had *no children*!
- Then?
- Well, then Judah commanded his second son, Onan, to do the well-known levirate duty for his brother's widow, to take his brother's widow as *his* wife “...and **perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.**”
- Important: the idea was not just to raise up offspring for his dead brother, but to also give Tamar children who would look after her in her old age – children who would serve like a pension fund for Tamar!
- But suddenly sinful Onan realised something else: “If I raised offspring for my dead older brother, then these offspring would stand first in line to inherit from my father Judah, which means that what I would get from father Judah will be next to nothing!”¹⁰
- Thus, very selfishly Onan decided to just have pleasure for himself by Tamar, and to make sure that Tamar would not conceive by him.¹¹
- Well, God then killed Onan for this sin!
- Thus, now that God had killed *two* of Judah's three sons, there was left only, Shelah – the youngest one – still only a boy; not yet a man!
- “Phew,” thought Judah by himself in great superstition, “Just as well that my third son is still too young to marry, for it seems there's something wrong with this woman, Tamar, for every time I give her a son of mine in marriage, that son dies!” “If I

⁹ שָׁלָה whom the Septuagint has rendered as Σηλωμ[υ]: Gn 38:5, 11, 14, 26 (J), 46:12 (P); Nu 26:20 (P), 1 Ch 2:3; 4:21.

¹⁰ cf. Greidanus (ibid:370)

¹¹ cf. verse 9 ***But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother.***

would now give her also my last son, Shelah, then will not he too die!?”¹²

- Thus, father Judah decided to tell Tamar to go back to her father’s house and to put on (and keep wearing) the clothes of a widow so that every man shall know she’s not available for marriage.
- Then Judah promises her: “I will give you my third son when he is old enough!”
- However, Judah lied!
- He was *not* going to give Shelah to her!
- He just wanted to get rid of a woman whom he thought was “bad luck!”
- Well, there you have it: the sins of a Judah:
 - marrying an unbeliever;
 - helped his son to marry an unbeliever;
 - cheating his son’s wife...
- Messy! Mixed-up! God-dishonouring! And *that* the life of a believer – yes someone from God’s people!!!?
- Imagine one of our church members goes and marries an unbeliever, then, some years later, tries to rob his daughter-in-law from her pension fund!
- That’s what *Judah* did!
- Sinning believers – they’re still around!

The Sinning Unbeliever

- Well, here are the sins of an unbeliever – yes, of Tamar the Canaanite widow!
- You see, Tamar was not going to swallow Judah’s cheating!
- So, in line with her sinful pagan customs¹³ – she schemed a plan.

¹² These thoughts of Judah are inferred from the context of our passage (cf. also Greidanus, *ibid*:371)

- You see, she has noticed that Judah's third son, Shelah, has now grown up to manhood! However, Judah is not sticking to his promise to give Shelah to her!
- What's more, Judah's wife has now passed away. Thus, he is now a widower!
- Meanwhile, she – Tamar herself, his daughter in law – is getting older and remains childless – a dishonour for her in her culture: people frown at her; look down upon her!
- So, very selfish – but desperate – she now schemes a plan – a plan that would be against God's law (which God would later on give to Israel)!¹⁴
- Here's her plan:
- Seeing that Judah is not giving her his *son*, then she will take hold of the *man himself*!
- You see, Tamar has heard that her father-in-law is going to travel to Timnah for the joyful celebrations, drinking & hilarity that used to accompany the sheep-shearing season!¹⁵
- So, she quickly throws off her widow's clothes and dresses herself as a daring luring temple prostitute!¹⁶
- And in her shrewd & sinful schemes she does not forget to cover her face with a veil so that father-in-law won't recognise her!
- Thus, she goes and poses halfway down the road to Timnah at the gateway to a place called Enaim ("Two Springs").
- And look, she has timed things so well that, at the very moment her father-in-law came passing by, she was ready to catch him!
- Now, just look at his sin! How has the believer fallen!

¹³ cf. Greidanus (ibid:372) who says, "She will try to conceive a son by her father-in-law Judah. Although this violated later laws in Israel (Lev 18:15; 20:12), it appears that levirate customs in Tamar's days allowed a father-in-law to raise up offspring for his deceased son." Also cf, Greidanus (ibid:fn 43), "Middle Assyrian Law number 33 and Hittite Law number 193 suggest inclusion of the father in the line of levirate responsibility..."

¹⁴ cf. Lv 18:15 **Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife; do not have relations with her.**

Also Lv 20:12 **If a man sleeps with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. What they have done is a perversion; their blood will be on their own heads.**

¹⁵ cf. Mathewson (apud Greidanus:372 fn 40)

¹⁶ זֹנֶה (Qal participle feminine singular of זָנָה commit fornication; be/act as a harlot); also cf. verse 21 who calls her a קִדְּשָׁה "a shrine/temple prostitute."

- Indeed, not knowing whose face was behind that veil, Judah falls for the bait held out by this “prostitute!”
- Again, as with all sinners, it’s all about number one – “myself!”
- So, he starts negotiating with her!
- Wow, how much messier can you get!?
- What a fool he makes of himself!
- She asks up-front for payment for her services!
- But he has no cash on him, so he wants to do things on credit – and so, he promises to later on send her a lamb!
- But shrewd, sinful & desperate woman that she is, Tamar now tightens the noose around his neck even further. Says she:
“Seeing that you can’t pay me up front, I insist that you give me a pledge – something valuable – a personal item of you, yes your signet ring with its cord as well as your staff!”¹⁷
- My brother & sister, a signet ring in those days worked like an identity document. Thus, it’s like insisting someone should give you his passport or driver’s license – or even a credit card!¹⁸
- And, can you believe it! So sinful/selfish and keen for self-gratification was Judah that he granted her wish! Yes, he handed over his ID and personal belongings!
- Then he committed a grievous sin – prohibited by God’s law! He became one with a prostitute!¹⁹
- And you & I ask, “But how is this story even in the *Bible*?” “How can it be?” “It just doesn’t rhyme!” “What’s the purpose of the Bible Author?” “Why did He include this story in the

¹⁷ cf. verses 17-18a “I’ll send you a young goat from my flock,” he said.

“Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?” she asked.

¹⁸ He said, “What pledge should I give you?”

“Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand,” she answered.

¹⁸ cf. Wenham (apud Greidanus, *ibid*:373), “The staff ‘was a symbol of authority (cf. Num 17:2; Ps 110:2) as well as being practically useful. It had a carved top to mark ownership.’”

¹⁹ cf. among other Dt 23:17-18 ***None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute.*** ¹⁸ ***You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.***

Also cf. Lv 19:29; Dt 22:21

Holy Scriptures?” “Should He not have tweaked this awful story, or have left it totally out of the Bible?”

- Well, Judah (this believer) – his sins get even more & more!
- You see, later on, when he wanted to pay the street prostitute her wages so that he could get back his ID and personal belongings, she was nowhere to be found!
- “Sir, there is no (never was a) temple prostitute in this town!”
- Then, three months later, big headlines!

**Townspeople and Judah, come hear the news!
Tamar, the widow, must have been unfaithful, for,
look, she’s expecting a child!**

- Judah responds!
- And his response reveals the raw hypocrisy of someone who professes to be a *believer*!!
- You see, Tamar – this ominous daughter-in-law whose husbands always die – if father Judah could get rid of her, then he wouldn’t have to risk the life of his only remaining son by giving him to her!
- Thus, here’s Judah’s verdict – and, let’s face it, as her father-in-law (and in that culture), Judah *had* the legal right to give the verdict: “She must die!” “Bring her out so that she can be burnt for her adultery!”
- Wow! What about himself? What about the part he had played in her sin?
- What a raw hypocrite!
- My brother & sister, sadly, even today the church is not rid of such hypocrites! They always see the splinter in another brother/sister’s eye, but not the plank in their own eye!
- And, to be honest, reality is: we’re all prone to acting hypocritically!
- Well, “clever” Tamar waits till the very last minute so that what she is about to reveal could have the greatest effect in public!

- Thus, as they are bringing her out to be burned, here's what she says: "The man to whom these items belong – he is the man by whom I'm expecting!"²⁰
- Wow, Judah! In an instant your sin has become public!
- How the giants have fallen!
- And what does Judah do?
- How does he react to this undeniable evidence?
- Well, he does not have much of a choice, does he?
- Says he: "She is more righteous than I..."
"I have sinned against her!"
- My brother & sister, what a juicy, messy, story – could have come straight from today's gossip magazines: "**Church cleric admits he is the father...!**"
- Wow!
- But why is this shameful, embarrassing story included in the Bible?
- Well, to highlight & magnify God's grace – which brings us to the last point...

By Grace, He Is in Control

- This story magnifies God's grace over sinful human beings!
- Also: it shows us that despite (no, even *through*) the sins of *unbelievers* – and even of *believers* (!!) – God is still in control of His saving's plan!
- Why do we say that?
- Well, look...
- Eventually, when Judah's Father – Father Jacob – had become old, which of his twelve sons received from him the greatest blessing – yes, which son ended up in the line of the seed of the woman (of Eve); yes, in the genealogical list of our Lord Jesus Christ?

²⁰ cf. v.25 *As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff."*

- Was it Reuben, Jacob's *oldest*?
- No!!!
- It was Jacob's *fourth* son, this very sinful, God-dishonouring cheater, self-gratifier & adulterer, *Judah*!!²¹
- And what about Judah's sons Perez & Zerah, born by this very Tamar the pagan; yes, Tamar who sank as low as the level of a prostitute!?
- Well, gauging by Matthew 1, the names of sinful believer Judah – and of sinful Canaanite Tamar, and Perez (child of prostitution) – all these names figure in the genealogical list of Jesus Christ!

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron... ancestor... of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,⁷ and Solomon... was the ancestor of... Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.²²

- My brother & sister,
- See how lowly the Son of God humbled Himself (Philippians 2)? Yes, see with what a lot of sinners He identified Himself to save you & me!?
- Well, focusing at first only on the messy lives of Judah & Tamar – their gross sins – the Bible reader rightly asks the question: “But is God still in control of His savings plan?”
- Then, looking at the *rest* of Scripture, the answer is a resounding, “Yes, He is!”

²¹ For Jacob's deathbed blessings on his sons, cf. Genesis 49

²² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Mt 1:2–16). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

- The all-powerful, merciful, and gracious God *is* in control, not just *despite*, but actually *through* the sins of believers & unbelievers!
- Question: Can God, regardless of this morally upside-down world (and the current pandemic) – can God regardless of the schisms and infighting within His *church* – can He still bring all His loved ones to full salvation on the day of Christ’s return?
- The answer is: By grace, He can! After all, has not our Bible text shown how God has worked His salvation plan regardless – nay, even *through* – the gross sins of Old-Testament Church members like e.g., Judah!
- My brother & sister, let’s get this straight: God is not the author of evil! No, He hates sin!
- Yet, He is also a gracious God!
- Therefore, He is able to turn even gross sins, like that of Judah & Tamar, into His good purposes!
- Question: Does this now mean that God’s grace gives believers (you & me) the green light to go on sinning so that His grace could be shown again & again (Romans 6:1, 15)?
- No, because the Christian, awe-struck by God’s unfathomably deep love and grace, will not reason this way!
- Indeed, the true believer, as he/she sees God’s infinite love and grace even for sinners like Judah & Tamar, is the one who will not abuse God’s grace, but will just go, “Lord, forgive me – a sinner!” “My God, thank You!” “I love You!”
- And: “I know You are able to finish what You have begun – on a world-wide scale, and also, personally, in my life!”

AMEN (2,351 words excluding footnotes)