



PREPARATION

- > *Spend the week studying Genesis 38. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools to enhance your preparation.*
- > **Determine** which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > **Pray** for our pastors and this week's message, the upcoming group time, your group members, and their receptivity to God's Word.
- > **Focus on the Main Point.** *Sometimes, despite our best intentions, our family life is dysfunctional. When things are difficult with our family, we trust God for strength, wisdom, and grace to do the right things.*

INTRODUCTION

Who are some of your favorite parents from a TV show, book, or movie?

Those of you who are married, would you say you have a good relationship with your in-laws? Why can dealing with in-laws be so difficult?

One of the trickiest parts of any marriage, even the best ones, is navigating the relationships between in-laws. Jokes about in-laws are a regular feature of network sitcoms because it is such a known and common experience in family life. The holidays put us in close quarters with lots of family members we are glad to see, but some we are less than enthusiastic to see. Dysfunctional family situations can add an extra layer of difficulty to an already messy time of the year. Today we will take a look at one such dysfunctional family and see how we can extend grace even in these situations.

LEARN

Select 3-5 questions to discuss as a group.

> **HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 38:1-30.**

Were you familiar with this story before studying it recently? To help everyone understand, talk through the events of this chapter together as a group. Who was Judah, and what did he do?

What responsibilities did Judah have to his daughter-in-law Tamar? Read 1 Timothy 5:8. What responsibilities do we have to our family members even if we do not get along?

What specific responsibilities do you have in your family (raising kids, caring for aging parents, contributing to the household income, putting a child through college, etc.)? How can you honor God by fulfilling those roles?

How did Judah fail to live up to his responsibility to Tamar? Why is it so painful when people we love disappoint us?

Judah was one of Jacob's sons by his wife Leah. Tamar married Judah's first born son Er, who displeased the Lord, so the Lord put Er to death. According to Jewish custom, Judah's second son Onan was to marry Tamar and give her a son to raise his brother. Onan refused to do this, so the Lord put Onan to death, leaving Tamar a widow. Judah then promised Tamar his young son Shelah when he was older; but when the time came, Judah did not fulfill his responsibility to Tamar. God takes the family seriously. Our families are supposed to be our primary means of support, which is why it is so difficult when our families are dysfunctional. However, dysfunction does not give us the right to disregard our responsibilities. No matter our past hurts, we are to take care of our families.

How does acknowledging we are all broken and sinful help us deal with our "extra grace required" family members? Why should we treat these people well no matter what has happened in the past?

How was the grace of God at work in Judah's life? Even though our relationships may be strained, why should we continue to have faith that God is at work behind the scenes?

Because Judah failed to live up to his responsibilities, Tamar took matters into her own hands to see that she had the heirs she was promised. Yet, Matthew 1 tells us that despite all the wrong and dysfunction involved in Judah's family, God still took all of this dysfunction, covered it with His grace, and used it for His redemptive purpose in the world. God knew the end of the story from the beginning, and He knows the end of our stories. Though we live amidst dysfunction now, we do not have the vision God has to see how even our family situations can be used for our good and for His glory.

LIVE

Select one question from this section to ask your group.

How can we be mindful that God's grace is bigger than any of our hurts?

How does seeing the damage Judah did to his family encourage you to give yourself more fully to your own familial responsibilities?

LEAD

Select one question from this section to ask your group.

God used Judah and Tamar's sin to bring Jesus Christ into the world. How could He use your past family hurts to bring glory to His name?

Often our past leads us to help others in their current struggles. Is there anyone you know in a dysfunctional family situation to whom you could offer your help and support?

PRAY

Praise God for the gift of family, even if our family situations aren't ideal. Thank God for bringing you into His family. Pray that knowing we have been adopted by grace into God's family would cause us to live graciously with our own families. Ask for God's help to take care of your own family.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- 1. Who in your family do you need to forgive this season?**
- 2. Memorize 1 Timothy 5:8.**

COMMENTARY

GENESIS 38

38:1-5. Judah's departure while Jacob grieved may have been motivated by a combination of intense guilt feelings and anger at his brothers. Continuing the dark picture of Jacob's sons begun in chapter 36, Judah rejected the covenant family's marriage tradition (24:3; 28:1) and took the daughter of a Canaanite as a wife. The couple conceived three sons, Er ("Watchful"), Onan ("Strength/Vigorous"), and Shelah ("Drawn Out [from the Womb]").

38:6-11. In keeping with ancient Near Eastern tradition, Judah got a wife for his son Er (24:2-4; Ex 2:21; Jdg 4:1-3). The absence of any ethnic identification for Er's wife Tamar ("Palm Tree") may mean she was not a Canaanite. Because Er was evil in the Lord's sight, the Lord put him to death. God's judgment on sinners is not always immediate but there are cases in both the OT and the NT, and presumably throughout history, when God brings justice swiftly (6:5-7; 19:13; Acts 5:4; 1Co 11:29-31). Er died before fathering any children, and ancient Near Eastern custom required the childless widow's brother-in-law to marry her and produce offspring who would be counted as the dead male's heir (Dt 25:5-6).

Onan, however, realized that the offspring would not be his, so he took a course of action known as onanism (named after Onan's actions here) to prevent conception. Onan's motive was evil in the Lord's sight, and so God killed him also. With two sons having died while married to Tamar, Judah feared that Shelah might die too if he fulfilled the responsibility to his sister-in-law. Consequently Judah sent her away to live in her father's house, with the deceptive excuse that Shelah was not old enough.

38:12-19. Even after Shelah had grown up and was eligible for marriage, Tamar remained a widow. In the meantime, Judah's wife had died. Having been deceived by Judah earlier, Tamar cunningly set about to deceive her father-in-law (cp. 27:15,27). In order to get Judah to fulfill his family's obligation to produce an heir for Er and remove the stigma of her childlessness, Tamar apparently knew her father-in-law's immoral character. So she took off her widow's clothes (signs of mourning), veiled her face, positioned herself alone by Enaim ("Two Springs") where she knew Judah would pass, and played the role of a roadside cult prostitute.

Though sexual relations with a daughter-in-law were prohibited in the Israelite law that was written centuries later (Lv 18:15), Judah did not recognize her and so propositioned her. As proof of his willingness to pay once he had money in hand, Judah had to give Tamar his "cylinder seal" (signet ring), among other items. Having achieved her objective by getting pregnant, Tamar returned home and put her widow's clothes back on for the time being.

38:20-23. Keeping his promise, Judah sent Hirah (v. 1) to Tamar with a young goat to get back his possessions. When Hirah returned to Judah without recovering Judah's possessions, Judah recognized he had been outwitted by the prostitute since his credentials represented his honor and were thus more valuable than a young goat. He attempted to minimize the humiliation by giving up on the search and thus telling no one else what had happened.

38:24-26. Three months after the fateful encounter Judah was informed that his daughter-in-law was pregnant. Since she had an obligation to remain chaste and available for marriage to Shelah, Shelah's father ordered that she be burned to death—a penalty that in later times was reserved for depraved sexual sins in the law of Moses (Lv 20:14; 21:9). Before she could be executed, however, Tamar informed her would-be executioners that she was pregnant by the man whose "cylinder seal" (signet ring) she possessed. Confronted by indisputable evidence of his responsibility for Tamar's pregnancy, Judah admitted that she was more... right than he; he had wronged her by denying her the right to marry his son Shelah.

38:27-30. Six months later it was discovered that Tamar was carrying twins in her womb; the language mirrors that of Jacob and Esau's birth (25:24). The birth was a complicated one, as one of the babies stuck his hand—not his head, as is normal—out the birth canal. The child pulled his hand back inside the mother.

As it turned out, his brother actually came out first, earning himself not only the rights of the firstborn but also the name Perez (“Bursting Forth/Breach”). His brother, born belatedly with the scarlet thread still tied to his hand, received the name Zerah (“Dawning/Shining”). Perez would later be mentioned as an ancestor of both David (Ru 4:12,18) and Jesus (Mt 1:3).