

Plumbing the Depths

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[0 : 00] How far is too far? I wonder if you've ever found yourself saying maybe you've seen someone or heard someone do something absolutely abhorrent, horrific,! And found yourself saying that that is what they have done is unforgivable.

What would someone have to do for you to say that there is no coming back? At what point in our own minds does that as unacceptable become that as unforgivable? How bad is too bad? If you were with us last week, you will know that this final episode of Genesis, starting from Genesis chapter 37, it did not get off to a good start.

Not because Joe's sermon wasn't good. Sorry. Yeah. Careful with your words. Joe's sermon was good. But what we saw in chapter 37, didn't we, was that while most of the sons of Jacob were not good, 10 of the 12 sons conspired to kill their brother Joseph.

Not even because of what Joseph had done, right? Because of what God had revealed to Joseph through dreams and because of what Joseph's father had given to him as a gift. Because of what Joseph had received from others, his brothers chucked him in a pit to die.

[1 : 35] Then they had a picnic. And during lunch, they had the bright idea of, well, actually, why don't we sell him? Because then not only are we rid of him, but we also make a few quid in the process.

Welcome. Welcome to God's covenant family. Chapter 37 was not great, was it? But I suspect by the time we finished reading chapter 38, right, chapter 37 is all of a sudden feeling positively rosy. Because while things did not begin well, did they? They have very quickly got a whole lot worse. And the big question I think we want to be asked in this evening is quite simply, why?

Why? Why? Why is this chapter here? Because we wouldn't bat an eyelid if it wasn't.

The Joseph narrative seems to jump right over this chapter. It goes seamlessly from chapter 37 into chapter 39, so that if chapter 38 wasn't there, you wouldn't think twice about it.

[2 : 45] So why is it here? Why do we need to be made so uncomfortable with such an obscene story? Well, that is the question we will hopefully have an answer to by the end of our time this evening.

But to get to that answer, we do, first of all, have to work through the text in all its messiness. But Judah is at the heart of this story, and so Judah is who we are going to focus on.

And as we go through this passage, we are just going to be asking the question, right, how far is too far? When does Judah pass the point of no return? When does it become unforgivable?

So let's just get into our first point this evening, where we see the desperate depths of Judah's sin. And we don't even reach the end of verse 1 before the yellow warning lights on the dashboard are flashing.

Joseph has just been sent down to Egypt, away from his brothers, away from God's covenant family. Finally, verse 1 of chapter 38, Judah is happy to march down away from his brothers himself.

[4 : 05] There was obviously plenty of sin present amongst God's covenant family a chapter ago, but Judah pulling himself away here from God's covenant family is the start of a very slippery, very steep slope into even greater sin.

By verse 1, the yellow warning light is flashing. By verse 2, it has turned red, because Judah takes a Canaanite woman as his wife.

Judah is walking in the footsteps of Esau here, taking for himself a wife from a people who were not part of God's people.

These were not God's people, that their race was not a problem, that their religion was. But off Judah goes, away from God's covenant people, to a people who worshipped false gods.

He was off to live life his own way. Now, I imagine at this point, most of us don't think Judah has gone too far. Right, if someone today were to turn their back on church, marry a non-Christian, I trust we would all eagerly welcome them back in should they return.

[5 : 19] But Judah is not about to do a U-turn. We're half a mile into the journey, the red warning light's on, but Judah is going to keep driving on until everything falls to pieces. We never actually learn the name of Judah's wife.

We know her father was named Shua, that's as close as we get, but we do learn that Judah fathered three children by her. Ur, Onan, and Shelah. It's Judah who does pretty much everything in this chapter, so he takes a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and the name of Ur's wife is Tamar.

Now, if you've been with us through this series in Genesis, even if you were just here last week, you'll know we've seen a lot, a lot of pretty messed up stuff in this book.

Amongst Abraham's descendants, there's been constant deception, there's been bitter rivalry, sexual morality, murder. I mean, apart from the incident with Joseph's brothers in chapter 37, Judah's other brothers had already engaged in some pretty disturbing behavior.

Reuben slept with one of his dad's wives. Simeon and Levi slaughtered an entire village in a fit of rage. These were not stand-up characters, and yet, for all the wickedness we have seen, it would appear there was something even worse about Ur, Judah's firstborn.

[6 : 48] Now, we don't get any details, maybe because we couldn't stomach them, but Ur stands out as the first individual in Genesis who is put to death by the Lord for his wickedness.

And so, Tamar is widowed from what must have been a truly wicked husband. And the custom that existed back then was that if a husband died without an heir, it was the duty of the next closest relation to marry the widow and preserve the family line.

That might sound pretty weird to us. It was completely normal back then. We see it, don't we, happen in a relatively romantic way in Ruth. It's not quite so romantic here.

Verse 8. Again, Judah's the driving force. He says to Onan, go into your brother's wife, carry out your obligation, get me a grandson, get your son a son, your brother a son.

But Onan has no interest in doing the right thing. He has no interest in doing the right thing, but he does have an interest in having sex. Onan is selfless.

[7 : 59] And so, well, to the watching world, right, Onan selflessly performs his duty. To the watching world, Tamar is two husbands in and cannot seem to get pregnant.

But peel the curtain back in verse 9. And we see, perhaps more than we want to, Onan is just using Tamar.

Abusing her. Going into her quite happily. Wasting his semen on the ground. I'll use you for sex. No chance am I getting you pregnant because I don't care about you and I don't want to do anything good for my brother.

The world might see a dutiful brother, but God sees. God sees a wicked man. And so, Onan joins his brother as the now two men. Who are individually put to death by God for their wickedness.

Now, we can see clearly, can't we, what the problem is here? Judah cannot. Judah puts two and two together and gets five.

[9 : 16] And thinks Tamar must be the problem here. Two sons. Both gone to Tamar. Both dead. So, instead of giving his third son to Tamar, Judah hatches a plan.

Verse 11. You just sit tight, Tamar. I'll be back soon when Shelah's a bit older. Right? But then he kind of, he turns around, right? He puts his arm around his youngest son.

Leans over and says, don't worry, Shelah. We're never going to see that woman again. And off they walk into the sunset.

I don't know if you've ever been stood up before. Or maybe even a friend's just kind of forgotten you were supposed to be meeting up for coffee.

It's a pretty horrible feeling, isn't it? You're sitting there on your own. You check the clock once. You check the clock twice. They're running a little bit late.

[10 : 19] Surely they'll be here soon. Five minutes pass. Ten minutes pass. Twenty minutes pass. Do you start to get nervous? You reach half an hour.

Still no sign. Your heart sinks. Is it time to give up? What do I do? Maybe just a couple more minutes. Judah was quite content to deliberately do that to Tamar for the rest of her life.

You just sit there and wait, Tamar. We'll be back soon. But Judah never had any intention of going back.

Tamar was effectively confined to her house. In her widow's garments, everyone knew she was engaged. And so she had no chance of moving forward with her life until Sheila returned. But Sheila was never going to return. She was left waiting, waiting, looking out the window for his coming. Maybe today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. Maybe next year.

[11 : 30] Has Judah crossed the line now? Is this the point of no return? Is this forgivable? Imagine, right? Imagine your sister. Or your daughter or your close friend in Tamar's position.

What would you think of the person doing that to her? We've barely scratched the surface of Judah's sin. Because now is when things get really bad.

After some time, presumably years have passed, Tamar, she realizes what's going on. She realizes what's happened. And so she hatches a plan of her own.

It's sheep shearing time. And so Judah is on his way to the flocks. We've seen kind of sin snowball, haven't we already? When Judah pulls himself away from God's people.

Now I think we see sin spread. Because of the sin perpetrated against her, Tamar responds with sin of her own. She has suffered terribly already in the few verses of this chapter.

[12 : 42] Two truly wicked husbands. Twice widowed. What once deceived. Less stranded for life. She has been sinned against terribly. She is undoubtedly a victim.

But that does not kind of legitimize what she does in response. When she realizes what Judah has done and hears that he's coming nearby, she puts aside her widow's garments and puts on a veil. She sets out to deceive the deceiver. She presents herself as a prostitute and then stands at the roadside. Now that is not good.

It is sinful. But we do want to realize that that is all she has to do. Present herself as a prostitute and stand there. Because then what happens next, verse 15 and 16, when Judah saw her?

Verse 16, he turned to her at the roadside. What follows is probably one of the least romantic conversations you will ever come across.

[13 : 50] Come, let me come into you. What will you give me? A goat. Well, you don't have a goat yet. Give me a pledge until someone comes with a goat. What pledge do you want?

I'll take your signet, your cord, and the staff that's in your hand. He hands them over. He goes into her. It could hardly be any colder, could it?

He wants sex. He's ready to pay for it. But he doesn't have cash to hand. So he hands over, in the interim, what is effectively his passport. That is what goes on here, right?

He says he'll send a goat. Tamar wants some collateral. So he asks for three things. His signet, his cord, and his staff that in a world kind of before passports and driving licenses were effectively someone's identity cards.

Judah hands them over. They have sex. They go their separate ways. And just like Tamar, Judah has no intention of ever seeing this woman again.

[14 : 53] Little does he know. So Judah sends his friend back with a goat to get his stuff back. But when his friend kind of looks around and asks about for the local cult prostitute, everyone looks back at him with a blank stare.

There's no prostitutes here. There never has been. Suddenly, this is all a bit embarrassing for Judah. So, verse 23, he decides just to take the hits.

In his mind, better to pretend you left your wallet on a bus and never see it again than send out a search party and have to admit that you left out the strip club.

I wonder, where does Judah stand in your estimations now? He's walked away from God's people. He's fathered two truly wicked sons.

He's despicably deceived Tamar. He's now callously slept with a prostitute who also happens to be his daughter-in-law and has done his best to cover his tracks.

[16 : 05] Has he crossed the line yet? If you were Tamar's brother, how would you feel about sitting next to Judah at the dinner table? Well, the months go by and Judah hears no news of his passport, but he does hear news of his daughter-in-law.

And it turns out she is pregnant. Which, of course, means that Tamar has been involved in sexual sin.

She was engaged to Sheila. Judah knows she's not been with Sheila. Tamar's been caught red-handed. How will Judah react?

Perhaps mercy? Here is a man who knows the temptations of extramarital sex. Maybe indifference. He's made it quite clear, hasn't he, that he doesn't really care about Tamar.

Well, it's neither of you, but I visit. In verse 24, Judah said, Bring her out and let her be burned. [17 : 23] Burn her. And so the pyre is put together. The oil is poured over it.

The men are standing by with their torches lit. Judah is ready. He is ready to give the command for Tamar, this woman who has been twice widowed, despicably deceived, sexually abused, to be burned to death for sleeping with someone outside of marriage just like he did three months earlier. It is hypocrisy of the highest order, isn't it? Judah is perhaps not alone in condemning people for their failings so long as his own remain hidden.

There is something of that in all of us, but I don't think any of us have gone this far. He is ready to watch Tamar burn for the sexual sin that he drove her towards and that he came to her for.

Surely, Judah has crossed the line now. Is this not unforgivable?

[18 : 54] If you knew all this about Judah and he lived next door, would you invite him round for the family barbecue? This man's sin seems to know no bounds.

So much so that I think if you took verse 10 of Genesis 38, and what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also, take that verse, copy and paste it after verse 24, I think most people would walk away from this chapter quite content.

A fitting finale to a sorry story. But that is not how this story ends. And that is perhaps in a chapter full of scandal.

For many people, it might seem like the greatest scandal of all. Because as desperately deep as Judah's sin goes, unbelievably, outrageously, God's mercy goes deeper still.

Our second and shorter point this evening, let's turn and see the deeper depths of God's mercy. I think we see the light of God's mercy begin to break through the dark clouds, even in verse 25.

[20 : 26] Tamar waits until the very last moment to produce her defense. As she is being marched to the stake, she says, but by the way, by the way, guys, if you want to know who else was involved in this sexual scandal, you'll want to find the man who owns these.

And out she brings the staff, the signet, and the court. She might as well be pulling out Judah's wallet, his passport, the keys to his house, and his favorite jumper.

Right? Everyone knows who these are. It would undoubtedly have been one of the most shameful, most embarrassing, most humiliating moments in Judah's life.

And yet, I can all but guarantee that he would look back on it as one of the best moments of his life. Because the moment that his sin was brought out into the open was the moment that Judah changed forever. Or it was the moment that God changed Judah forever.

[21 : 45] because God's deeper mercy to Judah begins the moment he brings Judah's sin out into the open so that he can hide from it no longer.

Now he must deal with it. He can either double down or he can turn around. And turn around is what Judah does.

He holds his hands up and recognizes that his sin his sin runs much deeper than Tamar's. She is more righteous than I.

She is more righteous than I. It might not seem like the most heartfelt repentance a little half-baked perhaps but this is the pivot on which Judah's life turns and completely transforms from here on he will go from what seems like the absolute worst of sinners to the one through whom God will save his people.

Even in Genesis from this verse onwards we see a very different Judah so that in a few chapters time his merciful actions his merciful words will save his family.

[23 : 16] Near the end of this book Judah this Judah this Judah will receive the most incredible blessing. His sin will be forgotten.

and that I think helps us understand in part why this chapter is here. From here on out Judah does some pretty amazing things.

He receives the most incredible blessing. Remove chapter 38. What do you think of Judah? He's a pretty great guy.

Look at all that he got. Look at all that he did. put in chapter 38 in all its messiness and we won't think for a moment will we? We won't think for the slightest second that Judah is the good guy here. Because we know who Judah used to be. Judah is not the hero. Judah is not the savior. Judah does not earn his blessing. God.

[24 : 24] God saves Judah. And through Judah saves his people. God gives Judah what he does not deserve. God shows incredible mercy to Judah.

He also shows great mercy to Tamar. Now the suffering sinner is blessed with two children, Zerah and Perez. Perez would go on to be the great great great great grandfather of King David. King David of course who would be the great great great great grandfather father of the far greater King Jesus. So that when you turn over to page one of the New Testament who are two of the very first people that we meet?

Who's the very first woman we meet in the New Testament? It's Tamar. Judah and Tamar, four bearers of Jesus. This Judah and Tamar, Judah, they are standing in the line of Jesus. But that is not where Jesus' association with people like this ends. Let me ask you one last time, did Judah cross the line?

[25 : 40] Did he go too far? Do you think what he did was unforgivable? Let me ask you that question another way. Do you look at Judah the way that Judah looks at Tamar?

There's a sinner who deserves death. Or do you look at Judah the way God looks at Judah? There's a sinner who needs saved by grace.

The answer to that question, I think will tell you where you would find yourself in that passage that William read for us earlier in Mark chapter 2. If you see Judah as a sinner who deserves nothing but death, if you are longing to see someone like this die, I think you would probably be standing with the Pharisees, shaking your head at Jesus.

What are you doing with people like that? God? I asked you earlier whether you would have Judah round to the family barbecue. I imagine for most of us the gut reaction is no.

No, of course not. And yet there is Jesus sitting with the tax collectors and sinners. He sees people in all of their sin.

[27 : 06] He knows the deepest, darkest secrets of their hearts. He knows all the wickedness that is in them and He goes to them and He sits with them as they are.

And having sat next to them, having understood just how much sin was in their hearts, He looked at Judah's life and said, I am going to die for you.

I'm going to give up my life so that you don't have to face the consequences of your actions. I am going to make your sin, the deepest depths of your sin, my own.

so that I can suffer in your place, so that someone who has sinned like this can have eternal life, eternal joy.

Jesus didn't just come from Judah, He sat with a host of Judas. He died so that Judah would never have to face the consequences of his sin.

[28 : 30] That is the gospel. as uncomfortable as the reading was, it wouldn't surprise me if some of us found this gospel pretty uncomfortable too.

That sinners such as this can find complete and absolute forgiveness in Jesus. That is what it means for God to mercifully save sinners.

That is what it means for Jesus to mercifully save you. Along with every other sinner, from the very bad to the absolute worst.

We all stand somewhere in there and into there Jesus came to save us. Let's just bring this sermon into land with a few applications. We'll start with the warnings and work our way to the encouragements.

First of all, let us guard ourselves against the Pharisee in our heart. There might well be people who truly are worse sinners than you are. Judah was worse than Tamar.

[29 : 42] But the Pharisee is the one who turns a blind eye to their own sin and self-righteously condemns the sin of others. We can guard against the Pharisee in our own heart by looking at our own hearts.

Looking at it openly and honestly. Thinking about what it means for everything in there to come out into the light. And you and I will know we are no more worthy of mercy than anyone else.

Secondly, know that however, however deep your sin might be, Jesus' mercy runs deeper still. if you think you have done something that is unforgivable, let me tell you, you have not.

You have not. It might be unimaginably bad, but if you think it cannot be forgiven, then you do not know just how deep the love and mercy of God goes.

[30 : 57] Whatever lies in your past, however bad it might be, even if it is worse than Judah's, there is forgiveness in Jesus. Complete forgiveness in Jesus.

His mercy runs deeper still. But thirdly, let me just take a moment to speak to anyone for whom perhaps this chapter cuts a little too close to the bone.

This is a chapter, isn't it, that is riddled with sexual sin, and many of you will probably feel that strikes a little too close to home. If that is you, perhaps you feel that the piercing eyes of the Pharisees looking down on you, but know that Jesus was, what were he to walk through those doors this evening, he would come and sit next to you.

He would come and sit next to you, he would go and die for you. Jesus comes to you, he came for you, he comes not to the righteous, but for sinners.

There perhaps be even some of you who, like Judah, have committed some pretty grievous sexual sin. who have mistreated people in a way that you hope, like Judah, never sees the light of day.

[32 : 21] Not only can your sin be forgiven, but you can be transformed by God's mercy. What we will see going forward is a truly, completely different Judah.

God's mercy not only saves, it changes. The deeper mercy of God's transforms so run to Jesus. Some of you might see even a shadow of yourself in Judah.

There will probably be others of you for whom Tamar's story is perhaps a little too familiar.

Mistreated by an abusive spouse, who have been abandoned, who have felt forced into sexual sin through the greater sin of others.

Let me say, I standing here, I do not know the pain that you have gone through, but I know that Jesus does. I know that Jesus does.

And just as he sits with the sinners, so also he draws near to the sufferers. And just as it was not for Tamar, for you too, that, however seared in your memory it is, it is not the end of the story.

[33 : 47] The pain of the past, as real as it will be, does not determine the way in which God will work through you and for you in the future.

Tamar's children, born through her suffering and her sin, would change the course of history.

Through her, God would save all of his people.

God sees what the world is not. Jesus knows all that you have suffered. You might feel broken beyond repair, but God's mercy, his grace, his love, they run deeper still.

God's love. And then fourthly and finally, and most importantly, let us praise God for the incredible, unbelievable, scandalous, outrageous debts of his mercy.

But without Genesis 38, Judah would come out of this book pretty well. but here is Genesis 38 in all its bleakness, so that we would get to the end of the story and know there is only one who is worthy of praise.

[35 : 07] It is not Judah, it is Jesus, the one who not only came from Judah, but came for people like Judah.

he came to us, to you and to me, in our sin. He sits by those who are not righteous.

He went to the cross of Calvary, bearing your sin, the deepest depths of your sin, on his shoulders. He died for us while we are still sinners.

sinner. He will transform us by his grace, because however, however deep the depths of our sin is, his mercy is deeper still.

Let us pray together before we sing. Amen. Father, we confess that there is so much sin in our hearts, even the sin of looking down on others who we consider worse than ourselves.

[36 : 31] Lord, we pray that you would help us to see the depths of our own sin, not so that we would despair, but so that we would delight in the incredibility of your amazing grace.

Lord, we thank you and praise you that however deep our sin might run, your mercy goes deeper still. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.