

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

## CONFORMITY WITH CORRUPTION

Genesis 38:1-30

by

Steven J. Cole

May 25, 1997

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Genesis Lesson 65

CONFORMITY WITH CORRUPTION  
Genesis 38:1-30

If the Bible were not inspired of God, Genesis 38 would not be there. It does not make God's people, the sons of Jacob, look good. If this episode had happened to one of your family members, you'd want to keep it quiet (unless, of course, you were offered a lot of money to go on Oprah to tell about it!). Why hang your dirty laundry out for everyone to see? But God has a way of hanging in full public view things that we would cover up. Aren't you glad that *you* didn't live in Bible times, to have your embarrassing family secrets put in the Bible?

Hanging dirty laundry in public view is embarrassing not only for those whose laundry it is, but also for those who have to view it. When you're around someone who shares intimate problems too freely, you feel awkward. You don't know what to say, so you mumble something and try to change the subject. That's the way many preachers and commentators approach Genesis 38. They skim it or skip it and move on to the life of Joseph, which is a bit more comfortable. But God saw fit to hang this dirty laundry in full public view. He put it here for our instruction.

Critics allege that some editor mistakenly put the chapter here, out of context. But that view is both arrogant and unnecessary. What at first glance looks like an interruption to the story of Joseph is actually crucial for a proper understanding of the "generations of Jacob" (37:2). This chapter shows us why Joseph, in God's providence, had to be removed to Egypt: God's covenant people were becoming conformed to the corruption in Canaan. It's a "meanwhile, back at the ranch" glimpse of what was happening in Canaan during the 22 years from Joseph's sale into slavery to Jacob's family's move to Egypt. To preserve His people from becoming absorbed into the Canaanite culture, God moved them into Egypt, where they became slaves. This forged Israel into a

distinct people and prepared them for the later conquest of Canaan, when God's time for judgment on that corrupt culture was ripe.

Two themes run through this chapter: The first is how quickly God's people can become morally corrupt. Judah, marries a Canaanite woman and blends in completely with that corrupt culture. His corruption is contrasted with chapter 39, where Joseph resists the advances of Potiphar's wife. The second theme is the holiness and grace of God. Those two qualities are always in perfect tension: God's grace never negates His holiness, nor does His holiness nullify His grace. God's holiness is seen when He strikes dead two of Judah's sons for their sin. But God's grace overcomes the gross sin of Judah and Tamar, so that their son, Perez, becomes a part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3-16). Thus we learn that ...

While God's people are prone to corruption,  
God is marked by holiness and grace.

Since the major part of the chapter deals with the corruption of Judah, I believe that God wants us to take a sober look at how prone we all are to moral corruption.

1. God's people are prone to corruption.

It would be great if being born into a godly family would somehow protect us from picking up the world's moral corruption. But it doesn't work that way. We're like Pigpen in the "Peanuts" cartoon strip, who is clean after his bath, but who steps outside and--Poof! He's instantly covered with dirt. Judah, the son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac (who was still living during part of this time), great grandson of Abraham, a member of the chief family God was dealing with on the earth, lived just as the Canaanites lived. You may have been born into a godly family, as I was. Perhaps your grandparents were godly people. But Judah's life shows that it is very easy for you to become as corrupt as our morally putrid culture.

Judah's corruption follows a progression:

- A. Corruption begins when you distance yourself from God's people.

We read (38:1) that "Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah." That didn't happen accidentally. It involved a choice on Judah's part. We don't know the reason for his choice. Perhaps he saw the way Hirah and the people of Adullam lived and thought, "I don't want to live a boring life like my grandfather Isaac or my father Jacob. I want some adventure, some excitement, some enjoyment out of life. I'm going to move near Hirah." Even though his brothers at this point were not a godly bunch, Judah's move signified a move away from the covenant people of God.

That's where corruption often begins. Many times it happens in the teen years. A young person is attracted to the lifestyle of the popular kids at school. Perhaps he made a profession of faith as a child, but he's not interested in the things of God. He thinks his parents must have migrated here from another planet. So at some point the teenager says to himself, "I'm going to hang around with that group at school and distance myself from the church crowd." It won't be long until he is just like them in his thought life, his language, and his morals.

But it's not only true of teenagers. The Bible says to us all: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Cor. 15:33). We may think that we'll stand our ground, but we'll drift without knowing it. While we need to build relationships with pagan people for the purpose of leading them to Jesus Christ, to do so for the purpose of camaraderie will corrupt us, not convert them. At Dallas Seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks told

us that the two factors which would distinguish us from our classmates ten years out of seminary would be the books we read and the friends we made. Corruption often begins when a person makes the choice to distance himself from God's people and to build friendships with worldly people.

- B. Corruption takes root when you marry outside of God's people.

Judah saw a Canaanite woman, the daughter of a man named Shua (whose name probably means "riches"--her name is not given), and "he took her [in marriage] and went in to her" (38:2). The emphasis is clearly on the physical, not the spiritual. Judah *saw* her, he liked what he saw, her daddy was rich, so he took her and had sex with her. That sounds like the basis for a lot of marriages in our day!

Judah and his wife had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. They grew up (marriage at 15 was not uncommon in that culture) and Judah took a wife for his oldest son, Er, named Tamar. So Judah, contrary to his great-grandfather Abraham's strong warning, has picked a Canaanite wife for himself, and now for his son. Thus, it's not surprising to read that Er was so evil that the Lord took his life. His sin is not mentioned, but he must have been a wicked man.

Then Judah told his second son to go in to Tamar and perform his duty as a brother-in-law to her. This is called levirate marriage (from the Latin, "levir," meaning "husband's brother"), a common custom in the ancient Near East which was later codified in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-10). If a man died childless, his brother was to marry the widow and the first son was regarded as the heir of the deceased man. Onan apparently married Tamar, but he did not want to give his brother an heir,

so he would interrupt the act of intercourse (which, by the way, is *not* a safe method of contraception). For his refusal to raise up an heir for his brother, God stuck Onan dead. He was not struck dead for practicing birth control, but for his selfishness in wanting his brother's inheritance for himself.

Judah didn't know why his sons were dropping dead. All he knew is, they married Tamar and died. So he wasn't about to have his third son marry her. He told her to go back to her father's house and wait until Shelah was old enough to marry, but he didn't intend to go through with it (38:11). In Judah's mind, Tamar was jinxed.

For centuries Satan has used intermarriage with ungodly people to corrupt those from godly homes, and it still works like a charm. Judah was a nominal believer at best, but when he married this Canaanite woman, it was insured that their children would be thoroughly pagan. She didn't train them to fear the Lord. If God hadn't struck them dead for their sin, these sons of Judah would have turned his descendants toward paganism. So if you're single, it's crucial that you wait on the Lord for a godly mate. Corruption begins when you distance yourself from God's people. It takes root when you marry outside God's people.

- C. Corruption comes to fruition when you live in conformity to a corrupt culture.

Several years go by (38:12). Shelah is old enough to marry, but it's becoming obvious to Tamar that Judah isn't going to keep his word on the matter. Since she's been twice widowed, her chances of finding a husband and having children are slim. Not having children was a disgrace, and as a childless widow, Tamar wouldn't have been provided for when her parents died. So she concocts a plan to trick Judah into getting her pregnant

so that she will be the mother of his heir.

Judah's wife had died, he had mourned for her, and now it was time for shearing his sheep. This was a festive time, "when sexual temptation would be sharpened by the Canaanite cult, which encouraged ritual fornication as fertility magic" (Derek Kidner, *Genesis* [IVP], p. 188). So Tamar took off her widow's garments, dressed up as a cult prostitute, with a veil, and sat in a conspicuous place where she knew Judah would pass by.

Sure enough, Judah saw her, assumed she was a prostitute, and solicited her services. (She probably disguised her voice. Not expecting it to be Tamar, Judah didn't detect that it was her.) They negotiated the price (one kid goat) and she took some collateral so that he would pay later. But it was the collateral, not the pay, she was after. She took his seal and cord--kind of like their Visa card. A man wore his special cylindrical seal on a cord around his neck, and when a business deal was transacted, he would roll it in hot wax to sign the deal. She also took Judah's specially carved staff.

They had sex, Tamar conceived, went home and put on her widow's garments again. When Judah sent his payment by the hand of his friend, Hirah, he couldn't find this prostitute. This put Judah and Hirah in an embarrassing situation. If Judah reported the theft of his seal and staff by a prostitute, or pressed looking for her, it would become public knowledge that a prostitute had gotten the best of him. These kind of stories were swapped in jest all over town. So Judah decided to absorb his losses and move on.

Three months later, word comes that Tamar is pregnant because of harlotry. She is officially engaged to Shelah, Judah's son. Even though Judah never intended to go through with the marriage (he thought Tamar was

jinxed), he acts highly offended and calls for the death penalty. Tamar would be out of the picture and Shelah could take another woman as his wife.

Or, it could be that Judah's harsh reaction reflected the common double standard. Men could go to prostitutes all they wanted, but women had to remain faithful to their husbands. So he hypocritically condemned Tamar for the same sin of which he was guilty. Of course, in condemning her, he was really condemning himself.

But Tamar had her bases covered. As they were taking her out to execute her, she calmly sent Judah's seal and staff to him with the message, "I'm pregnant by the man to whom these things belong. Do you recognize them?" Judah was had. He admitted that he had been wrong in not giving Tamar to Shelah as he had promised.

The striking thing about this story is the way Judah was thoroughly conformed to the corruption of the Canaanite culture. He's on his way to party with his pagan friend, Hirah, when he sees a prostitute. Without a thought of God, he turns aside to her. His readiness to do this and the calm way he handles the negotiations show that this wasn't the first time he had done this. Tamar knew this also, or she wouldn't have dreamed of trying it. When Judah finally gets caught, he doesn't say anything about his sexual sin. He just admits that he had done wrong in not keeping his promise to give Tamar to his son in marriage. The final sentence of verse 26 may indicate a degree of repentance or it may simply be reporting that Judah didn't marry Tamar.

We're often shocked when we hear of Christians, especially Christian leaders, who fall into gross sin. But this story is here to warn us that we all are prone to moral corruption. If you think, "Why I could never fall into this kind of sin," then you don't know your own

heart. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). It can happen to anyone who drifts away from the Lord and His people. We all must wage war daily against the lusts of the flesh. We live in a culture as corrupt as that of Canaan. And our enemy, the devil, is much more concerned to make Christians fall into sin than he is to bother with those who make no such claim.

But we don't have to be conformed to the corruption around us. The story of Joseph in chapter 39 shows that moral purity is possible, even in the face of aggressive evil. The power for holiness comes from our God, who is both holy and gracious toward sinners. Our text shows not only how God's people are prone to corruption, but also that ...

## 2. God is marked by holiness and grace.

### A. God's holiness means that He judges sinners and disciplines His people.

In our day, it is common to sacrifice God's holiness on the altar of His grace. Christians excuse sin with the glib phrase, "We're under grace." But God's grace does not exclude His judgment and discipline. Remember, it's in the epistle which champions God's grace that Paul writes, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

You may wonder, "Why did God strike down Er and Onan for their sin, but not Judah and Tamar?" The answer lies hidden in the inscrutable sovereign purposes of God. For reasons known only to God, He chose to make Er and Onan examples of His judgment, but Judah

and Tamar the objects of His sovereign grace. But both cases show that God, in His holiness, judges sinners and disciplines His people. Although Judah wasn't struck dead, he was disciplined by the Lord. He lost two grown sons. He would later go through the famine in the land and have to bow before his brother, whom he had despised.

But the real toll of Judah's sin wasn't in his own lifetime. As I mentioned earlier, this chapter shows the reason for the 400 years of slavery the nation had to go through. Judah's descendants went through 400 years of hardship, in part, because of his sin. We may think we get away with our sin and that it doesn't hurt anybody. But sin always exacts a toll. We reap what we sow, and our sin is often visited on our children to the third and fourth generation. God is a holy God, and that means He must judge sin and discipline His people so that they will share His holiness. But just as God's grace doesn't eliminate His holiness, so His holiness doesn't negate His grace.

- B. God's grace means that on account of Christ, He shows favor to those who deserve judgment.

We see God's grace here in that this morally corrupt Canaanite culture was allowed to continue in its sinful course for another 400 years, until "the iniquity of the Amorite" was complete (Gen. 15:16). During those 400 years, any Canaanites who had heard of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants probably mocked. Abraham's descendants were in slavery in Egypt. Canaan and its godless, pleasure-seeking culture was thriving. That's always the danger, that during a period of God's grace, sinners will mistakenly think that things will go on that way forever. They won't!

But the real beauty of grace in this chapter is revealed in

Matthew 1:3, where we learn that Tamar and her son Perez, born through this sordid affair, are included in the genealogy of Jesus. Judah and Tamar were living for themselves and for pleasure. Yet God used them to produce the ancestor of the Messiah. Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more!

Jesus Christ, the descendant of Judah through Tamar, was born without sin through the virgin birth, so that as the spotless Lamb of God, He could die as the substitute for sinners. Thus God is able to be both holy and gracious through Christ. He is holy in that all sin is punished. If a person rejects Christ, he bears the penalty for his own sin-- eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. If a person trusts Christ, Christ's death pays for that person's sins. God is gracious in extending forgiveness apart from human merit to every sinner who will receive it. There is grace abounding for the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Jesus promised, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). Every sinner will find mercy at the cross.

#### CONCLUSION

The well-known writer, Ernest Hemingway, was raised in a solidly evangelical home in Oak Park, Illinois. His godly grandparents had graduated from Wheaton College. His grandfather, Anson Hemingway, shared a close friendship with the evangelist, D. L. Moody. Ernest's physician father had wanted to be a missionary doctor, but his mother was too much of a city girl, and refused to go. But Ernest was raised in the church where he tithed his allowance, sang in the choir, and read completely through his King James Bible and passed a comprehensive exam on it.

After high school, he moved to Kansas City to become a reporter. He stopped going to church and began drifting from his upbringing. He enlisted in World War I, was wounded, and took to

drinking to ease the pain. He once offered his sister a drink. When she refused, "he told her not to be afraid to taste all of what the world has to offer just because Oak Park had labeled it sinful and off-limits." He married a worldly woman and moved to Paris to further his writing career. Totally alienated from his parents, eventually he would go through four wives. He was notorious for his drunkenness. In his late years, "he grew distant from everyone. He would not stand up straight and, he stopped communicating verbally." A friend said that his "every hour was filled with the pain of being truly lost and alone." Hemingway's own description was, "I live in a vacuum that is as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug into." Finally, on a sunny Sunday morning in Idaho, at age 61, Ernest Hemingway put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger. (Culled from, "Ernest Hemingway: Tragedy of an Evangelical Family," by Daniel Pawley, *Christianity Today* [11/23/84], pp. 20-27.)

Hemingway's tragic life did not have to go that direction. He made some bad choices: to distance himself from God's people; to marry outside of the faith; to be conformed to this corrupt world. He could have availed himself of God's grace and been conformed to Jesus Christ. His godly children and grandchildren could have followed in his steps. Instead, his beautiful, famous granddaughter took her life last year. His descendants are far from the Lord.

We all are prone to corruption. "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on [Christ]" (Isa. 53:6). We don't have to be conformed to corruption. If we avail ourselves of God's grace through the descendant of Judah and Tamar, the Lord Jesus Christ, He will keep us from the corruption of this evil world.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In light of 1 Cor. 15:33, when should we pursue a friendship with an ungodly person and when should we drop it?
2. How can we live in this evil world and yet avoid being corrupted by it?
3. If D. L. Moody were to step into our century, at which points would he say the American church has become corrupted?
4. How can we maintain God's grace without licentiousness and His holiness without legalism?

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