

Genesis 38 Considered

The story of Joseph and his coloured coat has won a place in our hearts. It's even been made into a highly successful musical. The path of Joseph being imprisoned for crimes he never committed only to be raised up to the highest position in the land prefigures Jesus who went through death for our sins before being raised to the right hand of God on high. Inspiring!

However, the story, which runs from Genesis 37 to 50, is interrupted by a sordid tale of Judah and his family in chapter 38. Hardly uplifting, and definitely not for children. So what are we to do with this? Skip over it, as if it isn't there?

Let's try to see it in context. The Scriptures contain a number of places where a change of direction causes us to reflect. We will consider some of them briefly.

Take Psalm 89. After thirty-seven verses in which the Psalmist reminds us of God's promises of protection and assistance to the house of David, he suddenly does an about turn and tells how in the event, God has trashed David's house. We are left scratching our heads. Putting these two themes side by side makes us confront the issue of when God's promises appear to fail. How did they cope then? How do we cope now?

The use of the word fool in neighbouring stories in 1 Samuel has a similar effect. David has a falling out with Nabal, whose name means Fool, and is on his way to kill him when Nabal's wife Abigail heads him off and prevents bloodshed (ch 25). Let the lord take charge of this fool here! Then in the next chapter, David is poised to kill king Saul who is pursuing him to take his life, but avoids bloodshed at the last moment. Saul confesses to David that he has played the fool (26:21). The repeated word fool encourages us to compare the two stories, and note the inference; vengeance is mine, says the lord. I will reply. Leave it to me.

I was taught at college that although it says in the Bible that God can do anything, he can't, because he cannot act against his own nature: the Bible does not point this out. So it was a joy to note that the two stories in Genesis 18, which appear unconnected at first glance, are not. Firstly, Sarah is told to expect to give birth in extreme old age, and when she laughs, the angel asks, is anything too hard for the lord? A few verses later, when the angel tells Abraham that Sodom is going to be destroyed, Abraham objects God as judge of the world can't do what is unjust (verses 14 & 25). These two stories being next to each other neatly raise the very point about limits to God's power that my lecturer was making. Nice.

So if we are alert, noting common themes of stories that are side by side in Scripture can be instructive.

If we apply this insight to Genesis 38, we immediately note that Judah's failure in his relationships with women contrasts Joseph's faithfulness over Potiphar's wife in chapter 39. If a sermon series skips over Judah's story and only mentions Joseph's success, all the ones listening who have relationship failures in their past that they regret will not be helped. But if it is pointed out that the resulting child of Judah's wrong-doing becomes part of the royal line leading to David and the Messiah, whereas Joseph's children were not, there is a message of great encouragement: God has everything under control, and even the

worst things you may have done in the past can be redeemed and be a source of blessing in his hands. God is not defeated by our wickedness, so neither should we be. (See Genesis 38:29, Ruth 4:18, Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33). Great stuff!

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