Living Hope
Christian Reformed Church
Belong • Believe • Bless

Sunday, October 4, 2026

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt
Scripture: Genesis 38
Sermon Title: Heartfelt Transformation
Transcribed by: Liza Perry

Good morning.

We are, as Kaes mentioned, in the book of Genesis. And for those of you who were here last week or following along, you remember that we left Joseph at the betrayal of his brothers, who had just sold him. And now he is on his way to Egypt, where he is bought by Potiphar to be his slave.

And so we're thinking that what comes next would be, *“Let's continue on with this story of Joseph, except God in his wisdom told Moses, ‘We need to interject Genesis 38.’”* Which many times people just kind of go, *"Well, we're just going to skip that one because that's not a good story."*

I'll just tell you right now, there is some stuff in this story where you go, *“This should not be in a children's Bible storybook.”* But it's important that it's there. And it's important that it's here because Judah is the largest tribe of Israel. And at this time there is this kind of hint that from Judah will come the Messiah.

And so God reminds Judah of its history and also reminds us of some very important things in life.

And so I invite you to follow along. We'll go through the story quickly, but then we will lead to what God is teaching the people of Judah, the people of Israel, and what God is teaching us.

Genesis 38*… [1] At that time, (so that is, shortly after Joseph was sold) Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. [2] There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her; [3] she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er.*

4 She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. 5 She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him. 6 Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death.

8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother." 9 But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. 10 What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also.

11 Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.

12 After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him.

13 When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife.

15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you." "And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked. 17 "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. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. 19 After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. 20 Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. 21 He asked the men who lived there, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?"

"There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here," they said. 22 So he went back to Judah and said, "I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, 'There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here.'" 23 Then Judah said, "Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn't find her." 24 About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant."

Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" 25 As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."

[26] Judah recognized them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not sleep with her again.

[27] When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. [28] As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, “This one came out first.” [29] But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, “So this is how you have broken out!” And he was named Perez. [30] Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Dear Lord, we come to You this morning. And Lord, sometimes as we read Your word, we go, *“Why did you include this?”* And so, Lord, as we ponder what You have to say to us, Lord, we pray that You will open our ears, that You will open our hearts. And Lord, through this we too may see Your incredible grace, the amazing love that You have for us. And Lord, how You have loved us so much through the death of Your Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So this story, I need to actually take you back for just a moment. If we can go to the picture about a reminder of compromise and assimilation. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago, Moses sat down with us by the campfire because he said to the people of Israel, *“You need to hear this story?”*

Because of what happened there. Where Jacob allowed his kids to assimilate with the people of Shechem, and how it led to trouble within the family, and how it was not obedient to what God had asked them to do.

And so now we have, in the middle of this story of Joseph, Moses and the Lord are doing the same. They are reminding the people that, *"Let me tell you what happened. And for all you people in the tribe of Judah who think you are so good, let me tell you the story of your ancestor Judah. Let me tell you how he compromised himself. How he went from a place of living in community with his family and the Lord, and he compromised himself with the world around him.”*

And he begins in ***Genesis 38*** by simply saying, *“... and Judah went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hiram.”* Judah went down.

You may recall that when Abraham was there and he had a son named Isaac, he said, *“Do not let Isaac marry any of the Canaanite women, because if he does, he will get assimilated and take on their gods and live in a way which is not pleasing to the Lord.”*

So he sent his servant away to get a wife for Isaac back from his own people. When it came time for Jacob to get married, Rebekah actually sent him back to her family so that he would not marry any of the Canaanite women. They saw how Esau had married Canaanite women, and it was not good.

Now Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, goes down, and rather than finding a woman of faith, he went into the local towns and it mentions that he married someone there. This is Judah's family.

And so now we have Judah. And it talks about how Judah had three sons. In ***Genesis 38:3-5***, he's got Er and Onan and Shelah. It's not quite so clear in this translation, but it is very important to understand that Judah named the firstborn Er. The father naming the child at that time was essential for passing along the family heritage.

But what doesn't show up so well in this translation is that for Onan and Shelah, it was his wife who named them.

Which, in that way, we begin to see this aspect of Judah abdicating his responsibility as a father. Judah was called by God to be a responsible father. And here, he begins to show how he is letting that go, that he is already assimilating into culture and allowing culture to say, *"Here is what we want to do."* And he's just saying, *"That's okay, we can do that."*

And then we read that Er was so wicked that God killed him. That's not a passage that we often quote in Scripture. You know, suddenly you just read that. It was there in ***Genesis 38:7*** it says, *"7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death."*

That's a great verse to talk to people about wanting to come to Christ, isn't it? You are so wicked, so that if you don't turn around, the Lord will just put you to death, without realizing the death that we live in, all of us, all the time, when we don't turn to God.

But within this culture and later on in Israel's culture, (it's mentioned in Deuteronomy) there is this thing called the Levirate marriage. Because of the importance of the firstborn and how the family tree is passed on through the firstborn, the understanding of Levirate marriage is very important here because the firstborn would get a double portion of the inheritance.

As had been said before, we've talked about this, but this double portion of the inheritance was a way in which God was blessing and providing for the family. But it was a matter of, *"You now are the one to carry on that family name."* So if there are three children, well, it would have to be three males. Sorry, women, you wouldn't be included in the inheritance. You would acquire the inheritance of your husband, which we'll see later on is so important.

So if there were three males, the inheritance and the land would be divided up into four sections, and the oldest one would get two, and then the next two would each get one.

So when Er dies, Onan is told by his father to complete his responsibility of taking Tamar as his wife. And in that, he would then fulfill this aspect of the Levirate marriage.

Now Onan's doing the math. He's like, *"Hold on, if I have a child with Tamar, that child is going to get a double portion. If I don't have a child with Tamar, the lot divides in three and I get two thirds. Do I want a quarter or do I want 2/3 of the inheritance?"*

And so it says there that Onan was happy to sleep with her, but he didn't want to take the responsibility. And so it says that he spilled his semen on the ground.

In fact, the word there used is the word shachath (sha.chat - **שָׁחַת**) , which means to ruin or to destroy. It appears two other times in Genesis, in two other stories. That is the same word that is used to describe when God says that He destroyed the world in the Flood. It uses this word. It is the word that is used when God says He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

So it's not just that Onan wasn't taking his responsibility seriously. It was that Onan was intentionally destroying the work of God in the line of Judah. And so we see that Onan is also put to death.

Now Judah's getting a little nervous. “I've had two sons married to this woman, and each one dies. Is this woman cursed? So my youngest son, Shelah, he's not quite old enough yet. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to send Tamar home. You go live with your father, and when Shelah becomes old enough, then I will give him to you as your husband.”

But in doing this, Judah is showing a couple of different things. One, he's afraid of losing his third son. That's just basic. But the second thing is he is now again abdicating his role as a father.

As a father, he has responsibilities to this girl because he has taken her now under his roof because she is married to his son. And so rather than fulfilling those, he is sending her away. And basically what he is doing is he is giving her a death sentence, because being sent back to her father's home means that she cannot marry anybody else and that there is no one to look out for her. She is on her own in a culture which does not always look out for women.

And yet through all of this, we hear nothing from Tamar. She simply goes back to her father.

Judah's wife dies, and he goes to be with the sheep shearers. This is an annual process in which all the farmers get together, they spend time with the people who shear their sheep. Let's just say it's a party.

Last night—I don't know if any of you noticed or heard—all the students were out having a party. So you can imagine this is what it's like in Timnah when all the sheep shearers come together and they just have a good time.

And Tamar is thinking to herself, *“Shelah's been old enough for me to marry, and Judah has not fulfilled his role as a father in giving him to me.”* And so she goes and disguises herself as a prostitute, and Judah meets her. He meets a disguised Tamar. He doesn't realize it is her. And he basically says to her, *“Woman, I'd like to sleep with you tonight. I need to take care of my inner needs and lusts.”*

To which she says, *“So, what will you give me?”* He says, *“I'll give you a sheep.”* She says, *“Well, obviously you're not carrying one in your back pocket right now. So what are you going to give me as a pledge?”*

And so he gives a pledge of a seal that's on a cord. The seal is basically a cylinder roll, which would be tied to a cord in the neck. And when you're making a business agreement, you would take that cylinder roll and you would roll it in some soft clay, and it would be as your signature. So now you have signed this space.

And then he gives her the staff. Which is his social identity, because the staff would be then listed as well, and you would be able to recognize a person as a staff.

How many of you, when you pull into the parking lot, you can tell who's here by the car? Think about that. Okay? You know who it is.

So Tamar basically takes his legal identity and his social standing. His license and his credit card. That's what he gives for one night with her. He is willing to surrender that, thinking he'll get it back and thinking it's not a big deal, but he's willing to give that up for that one night.

So a couple days later, he sends his payment. Notice that he doesn't bring the payment. He sends his payment. He hires someone to bring it. He's like, *"Take this to the woman."*

But then he also tries to cover up the shame of the sin. Because you'll notice that in ***Genesis 38:15***, it uses the word (za.nah - **זָנָה**), which is this word, *to act as a prostitute or a harlot*. But in ***Genesis 38:21***, he calls her a (qu.de.shah - **קְדֵשָׁה**), which is a cult prostitute.

Now he's trying to justify his action by saying, *"I'm just being like one of the crowd. Everybody in the city participates in this religious activity. So there is nothing to be ashamed of."*

Hirah comes back and says that she's not there. In fact, there hasn't been a cult prostitute there. Judah in this process is like, *"Just let her keep it. I'm not going to continue on this road. I'm just going to pretend it never happened and it'll just go away. I don't have to deal with what I've done. We'll just let it go."*

Unfortunately for Judah, Tamar becomes pregnant. The word is out that Tamar is pregnant.

And in the passage in ***Genesis 38:24***, it says, ***"24*** *About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant."*

The actual reading is that Tamar was playing the prostitute and now is pregnant by being a prostitute. There's a double emphasis there. There is this aspect of, *"Her sin is far more serious than anything else."* There is this specific blaming on her with this double emphasis.

And Judah goes overboard and Judah calls for her death. *"Let her come out and be burned."* Which is far beyond any of the cultural practices there for punishment.

Richard D. Phillips sums up very clearly what was going on in Judah's life when he says, "*Ignorant of his own compromises and sinful behavior, Judah puts the blame for the past on his father and for the present on his innocent daughter-in-law, neglecting the far more pressing problem of his own sinful nature."*

How easy is it for us to recognize the sins in others and fail to see the sin in our own life?

R. Kent Hughes reminds us that the role of Tamar was important to God's plan when he says, *"Tamar the Canaanite, who began outside the people of God, turned out to be a heroine in the God's people. Tamar aligned herself with the purposes of God, and through her, God's promise to Abraham (blessing to all the peoples of the earth) was fulfilled."*

Now he's not saying that what Tamar did was right. Two wrongs don't make a right. But he was saying, *"Judah, you're blaming Tamar. You need to be careful because it is actually you who needs the transformation."* And interestingly enough, when you look in Matthew at the genealogy of Christ, there are four women that are mentioned. And Tamar is the first of them.

But here we see Judah's transformation. Judah acknowledges the sin and says that, *"... she is more righteous than I."* This is an important step in Judah's life.

And here Moses is telling the people of Israel, *"You need to remember that it is never about the other person. It is always about where you are standing before God."*

John Piper says, *"Confessing is not a payment. It is simply an agreement with God that this was an ugly and unworthy thing for me to do, and I am ashamed of it. I am sorry for it. I turn from it. I embrace the finished, complete, perfect, once-for-all work of Christ afresh. I rest in it. And I enjoy the fellowship that he (Christ) secured."*

When Judah confesses that, yes, I did wrong, that is a transformational piece for him, because it is at that point that it can lead to repentance. It is at that point where we say, *"Lord, I understand that coming to You and repenting is what I need to do."*

There's an interesting piece about repentance. In repentance, the aspect is that you move closer to God by acknowledging your own uncleanness. Typically, if you gather as people who are unclean, you become more unclean. But as you come to Christ and admit your uncleanness, you actually become more clean. And in fact, the closer you come to Christ, the more you recognize His beauty and His glory.

It is in this place where we often stand afraid of Him and want to stay away because we're afraid that we will receive what Er received, but that in real life, as you come closer to Christ, you will receive His grace.

Richard D. Phillips says, *"Having his eyes open to his sin, Judah no longer blamed others for his problems, but turned to the Lord for redeeming grace."*

In ***2 Corinthians 7:8-11***, it says this, *"**8** Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— **9** yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. **10** Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. **11** See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to*

clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter."

Paul is telling the Corinthians, *"I've told you some hard things. But in telling you these hard things, what it's led to is you being in that place where Judah was, where you realize that it is I who have sinned and therefore I need to repent."*

Sinclair Ferguson wrote a book called ***The Grace of Repentance***. And in there he gives two statements from Calvin and Luther which says,

Calvin, repentance involves a threefold cord: *"... denial of ourselves, mortification of our flesh, and meditation on the heavenly life."*

Think about what Christ says in ***Matthew 16***, where he says, *"I invite you to deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me."*

Luther says, *"Repentance does not merely begin the Christian life. According to Scripture, the Christian life is repentance from beginning to end!"*

And I think sometimes we feel like, *"Okay, I've repented from that. I'm all good now."* I hate to disappoint myself, but I'm not all good. I still need to repent.

In fact, in ***Ezekiel 18:21-23***, it says, *"21 "But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. 22 None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. 23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"*

And then in ***Ezekiel 18:31***, it says, *"31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit."*

Repentance is this invitation by God to come closer to Him.

Sinclair Ferguson in his book goes on to say, *"In that covenant, God has made a provision to be gracious to those who rebel against him. He therefore urges them to return to him, to plow up hearts that have become hardened, and to circumcise hearts that have been covered with the spirit of the world and the flesh."*

Repentance from Judah is an invitation to all of us.

In ***Ephesians 1:13b-14***, *"13 … When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."*

I love what ***Richard D. Phillips*** says. *"What a blessing it is to have God convict us of our sin! Until we have come to Judah's place, there is no more greatly needed blessing in any of our lives."*

Repentance is an invitation to the grace of God. Repentance is an invitation to the grace of God. Judah understood that.

Judah understood that simply trying to cover his sin, simply trying to pretend it wasn't there, or trying to create a way in which he's saying, *"We can justify this,"* really didn't lead to life, but it led to death.

Psalm 103:1-4 says… *"[1] Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. [2] Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—[3] who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, [4] who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion… "*

Christ invites us to that place.

Repentance, in order to happen, has to be intentional. And when you think about God in the aspect of welcoming us, God said, in order for people to repent, we have to remember that we need to come to the cross. God took His Son and sent him to the cross so that we can repent.

And when we talk about repentance, we talk about the blood of Christ washing us from our sins. And when Christ died on the cross, He said, *"I do this to wash away your sins, to make you clean before Him."*

And so this morning, I'm going to ask the ushers if they'll pass out a little sheet of paper to all of you. We're going to do something which may be a little bit scary to some. But when we talk about repentance being intentional, that's an invitation to come before the Lord and say, "Lord, I'm not just going to say the Lord's Prayer and just say, *"Forgive us our sins."* Each of you is going to get a little sheet of paper.

And one of the things that ***Sinclair Ferguson*** says in his book, ***The Grace of Remembrance***, is, *"The first thing we have to do is we have to name the sin."* We have to be honest with ourselves.

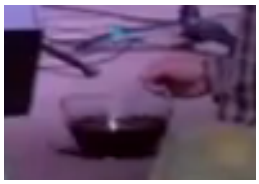
Did you notice that Judah said, *"She is more righteous than I?"* And he didn't even go to his sin of sleeping with her. He went to his prior sin of not giving his son to her. That was the problem that created the rest of the mess.

And so what we're going to ask you to do is take this piece of paper, and on this piece of paper, either with a word or a symbol, I want you to write down what it is that you need to repent.

And some of you might think, *"I only get one sheet? I could use like a dozen or more."* And that's true. And maybe this is something that you can continue on in your own prayers later on.

But today I'm going to invite you to take part in something in which it is a physical expression of repentance. And we all need it. We all need that physical expression of repentance.

And after you have written on this piece of paper what it is, I'm going to invite you to come forward and to put the piece of paper in the water representing the blood of Christ.



Now, some of you might be thinking, *"Why do I want to leave my sin up there?"* Well, the amazing thing is that Christ says that He washes away our sin. And so as the paper goes in the water and the water gets stirred, the paper dissolves and you become washed and clean.

But ***Sinclair Ferguson*** says it's not just important to remember and to name the sin, because anytime you dig a hole, unless you fill it with something, it will get filled with something. And chances are it gets filled with what you just said you're getting rid of in the hole.

So on the way back to your seat, in the front rows, there are other pieces of paper. These do not necessarily dissolve in water. On this piece of paper, I invite you to write down the grace of the opposite.

So, for example, if I need to repent of my lack of time with Christ in prayer, then on this piece of paper I write down prayer.

If I need to repent about the fact that I have been lying about who I am, then I need to write truth on this paper.

If I am repenting of the fact that I've got bitterness in my heart towards someone, then maybe I need to write a blessing on this paper, that I bless them instead.

And so we're going to give ourselves time to think, to come before the Lord in prayer and repentance. Because God invites us to come to Him in full repentance. Because when we do, He promises that He will wash our sins away. And the life we have with Christ is far better than any life we could ever have hanging on.

Let me pray. Dear Lord, we thank You that you are the God of all. Lord, we thank You for coming to die on the cross for our sins. Lord, we thank You that in your blood our sins have been washed away and they are clean. And we stand clean before You.

And so, Lord, now we in a physical act of repentance come before You and repent of maybe just one and we go home and we repent of others. Or maybe we repent of a lot. And we bring it before You, Lord. And Lord, we thank You that You promise to forgive.

And then Lord, help us to fill that space with ways that are honoring to You, that we may live closer to You in all that we do. In Jesus name. Because it is only by the power of Jesus, death and resurrection that we can even do this. Amen.

And so as the water is up here, we're going to sing a couple of songs and we'll just take our time with this and let it go. And so we'll begin with this aspect of confession.

[Singing - congregation slowly comes up and puts their paper in the water and returns to their seat.]

Our sins. They are many, but His mercy is more. And may we always remember that. And may each of us in our days have awareness like Judah in realizing that we have sinned and we need a righteous Savior.

Renée has created a sheet which will be available at the end if you take one and share it. Otherwise I can gladly print more. We'll make them available later on as well. It's just a sheet about confession, repentance and forgiveness.

Some things about confession, some things about repentance, but then, most importantly, an aspect of forgiveness. To know that your sins have been washed clean in the blood of Christ.

And so I invite you to stand and receive this gift from God as He washes us clean. He promises that we do not leave this place on our own, but that we leave this place with the presence of the Holy Spirit walking with us and Christ continuing to do work in our lives.

And so I invite you to extend your hands to receive this from God to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy. To the only God, our Savior. Be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ, our Lord, before all ages, both now and forevermore. Amen. Praise the Lord.