



Leaves From the Tree

Studies from God's Word

In 2005, Pastor Tim Bourgeois began a daily bible reading to encourage Tree of Life Christian Church and the larger body of Christ to read the entire Bible cover to cover.

The following series of articles are transcripts of Pastor Tim's original emails.

Please use these articles for meditation, personal devotion, Bible study, or your own daily Bible reading.



GENESIS 34 - 39

Genesis 34

34:1-4 - "Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force. He was deeply attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this young girl for a wife."

An unexpected and deeply unsettling event interrupts Jacob's return to the Promised Land. He will discover in this event that while this land represents symbolically God's blessing to him because of God's purpose for this land in the future, in the present there is trouble here because of the current inhabitants of the land. Generations in the future, when God brings the descendants of Jacob back to possess this land He will have them take it by force because of the spiritual and moral corruption of the seven nations living here. The Hivites mentioned here are one of those seven nations that will later be judged by the Lord. In Shechem and Hamor's actions in this chapter we see a preview of where this nation is heading in its deterioration. Shechem's actions are indefensible. He sees a visiting young woman in his city and rather than extend respect and hospitality, he forcefully violates her purity. The shift in his perspective toward her from before (lust) to after (romantic attraction) is no justification for what he has done. Shechem does everything out of order, as his subsequent attraction, love, and tender words should have preceded any contact with Dinah, and been the motive to seek a marriage through contacting her father. Shechem is all too similar to many young men in our culture today. He is driven by lust, and his character is no restraint for his urges. Marriage is an issue for him, but only as an afterthought and only as a means of permanently possessing the object of his craving.

Dinah is clearly the victim in this situation, as the emphasis on Shechem's force is the key factor in understanding what happened. However, we are given a small detail regarding Dinah's that is meant to show us that her actions are a factor, though not the actual cause of what happened. Dinah "went out to visit the daughters of the land." There is a nuance in the description in the original text that hints at Dinah having a desire in her heart to associate with the daughters of the land. Her interest in some female companionship in her own age range is understandable, because she is the only daughter of Jacob mentioned in his household. What we should question is not her desire for friends, but the lack of wisdom she showed in leaving the safety of her camp in a new land in which the inhabitants were not yet proven honorable. The lesson here is that normal desire for friendship and companionship should always be tempered with wisdom and discernment. It is also worth noting that there is no mention of either her father or mother giving any wise counsel to her as they arrive in the land to be on guard in associating with the people of the land. Their silence toward Dinah is not

insignificant in light of what then happens to her. Sometimes the worst advice we give as parents is our silence.

34:5-7 - "Now Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob kept silent until they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done."

We have seen in key circumstances of his life that Jacob has proven to be an inconsistent leader at best. He is the head of this family, and as the patriarch, it is his responsibility to take the lead in the best of times and most importantly, in the worst of times. Jacob somehow hears of Dinah's defilement. An important issue is highlighted in this brief description. Dinah's tragic experience is described as her being "defiled." This is significant, because it is a religious term based in the violation not just of her personal boundaries or privacy, but of her holiness or spiritual purity. It is a subtle but critical distinction in the text to show us that sexual issues must always be treated as spiritual / moral issues even before they are treated as personal issues. In other words, what has happened to Dinah affects God, not just Dinah. Shechem has violated God's standards not just Dinah's. Our society today has almost entirely lost this truth regarding sexuality. The issue of spiritual defilement in sexual matters has been mostly obscured or obliterated in the flood of sexual content in movies, television, internet sites, magazines, etc. Believers who are called to know, understand, and represent God's holy standards in the midst of such a culture must be wary of whether they are more influenced in their own perspective by the media of the culture, or by God's Word.

The response of Jacob and his sons to the news is an interesting contrast. Neither responds in the way that they should. Jacob and his sons represent two extremes of the wrong way to handle such an important issue affecting the family. Jacob responds with silence motivated by fear. The sons respond with grief leading to vengeful anger. The greater responsibility here is Jacob's because he is the leader. His silence results in him effectively abdicating his authority to his sons. For the remainder of the chapter Jacob fades into the background as his sons inappropriately take the lead, and as we might expect, mishandle the situation leading to even greater tragedy. Their vengeance is actually worse than the original offence to which they reacted. What is again strangely missing in the initial response of both Jacob and his sons is any effort to stop, pray, and seek the Lord for His wisdom. Jacob certainly should know better by now that handling such a critical matter without purposefully involving the Lord can only lead to disaster.

34:13-17 - "But Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised, then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go."

Jacob should have been the one responding here to the proposal of Shechem and Hamor. There is a principle in God's Law that was later given to Israel through Moses to govern their interaction with the peoples of the Promised Land. "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you." (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). God did not want the covenant people to mix with the people of the land in this way because of the inevitable spiritual / religious mixture that would follow. Jacob says nothing to the proposal, further undermining his own leadership of his family. Instead the sons of Jacob speak up and make the right decision for their father, but in the wrong way and with the wrong intent. They used deceit to set up the city for reprisal. Their deceit was magnified because they used circumcision, the covenant sign, as the tool for their plan. This was God's special sign of the covenant and was meant to represent God to the unbelieving world. Instead, the sons of Jacob use God's sign for their own malicious purpose. They essentially convinced the men of the city to convert through circumcision, but they had no intention of honoring the sign the men imposed upon themselves. Even though the men of the city had their own motives for accepting circumcision, once they were actually circumcised, the sons of Jacob were responsible to treat them as members of the covenant.

34:25-31 - "Now it came about on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and came upon the city unawares, and killed every male. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went forth. Jacob's sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household." But they said, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"

On the third day following their circumcision when the pain and inflammation of the procedure were the worst, two of Dinah's brothers reveal the depth of their devious plan. They had never intended to accept the Hivite men into their covenant. The circumcision is not honored, but becomes the means for them to kill all the males of the city by themselves. After Simeon and Levi have killed all the men we see their brothers loot the city and take the women and children for themselves. The reason all the brothers use to justify their actions is that their sister has been defiled. What was done to Dinah was terrible, but their response was far out of proportion to the initial violation. Justice requires that the punishment for any violation fit the crime committed. God later addressed this exact kind of scenario in this statute from the Law. "If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days." (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). In this case, Shechem was required to pay the bride price for Dinah, marry her, provide for her for the rest of her life, and never divorce her. Shechem sinned by forcing himself on Dinah, but he and his father also made a legitimate attempt to follow up with an offer of a generous bride price and marriage. The punishment that Jacob's sons carried out went way beyond God's justice. They executed not just Shechem, not just his father, but every male in the entire city. Then they stole their families and all their property.

It is only at this point that Jacob emerges from the background where he has been silently watching all this unfold. He attempts to take his role as head of the family again, but his words are devoid of any spiritual impact by this point. He does rebuke Simeon and Levi as the two ringleaders, but his rebuke is noticeably lacking any concern for righteousness, justice, the covenant or the Name of God. Instead, he only rebukes them for causing him trouble and putting all of their lives in danger. His fear is his dominant concern. He also fails to even say a single word to his other sons for having looted the city. In his expression of concern for what has happened, Jacob shows that even after all the Lord has revealed to him and done for him that he is still capable of forgetting the Lord when he most needs to remember Him. He anticipates they will all be killed when he should know that, in spite of his family's failures, the Lord has promised to watch over them and protect them. Jacob's failure to lead as a true spiritual head of the family is highlighted in the way the confrontation with his sons ends. The sons have the last word. Their final answer to their father is to justify their own sin by reminding him of the sin of Shechem.

Genesis 35

35:1 - "Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."

God once again speak to Jacob, and His timing as always perfectly meets Jacob at a point of great need. This Word from God comes on the heels of the destruction of the city of the Hivites by his sons Simeon and Levi. Chapter 34 ended with Jacob declaring his fear of the his own demise and the destruction of his entire family by the inhabitants of the land. His fear was compounded by his failure to properly lead his own family as evidenced by his inability to restrain his son's violent anger. In the moment of crisis, Jacob does not call on the Lord for help, direction or wisdom. Instead he seems to wallow in his fear. It is in the midst of this crisis in which Jacob has momentarily lost his way, that God speaks. Interestingly, God does not directly address his current crisis at all, but rather, He reminds Jacob of another moment of crisis in his life some thirty years before. God reminds Jacob of Bethel, and instructs him to return to Bethel. This command of the Lord to journey to Bethel is both practical and spiritual. Jacob needs to physically travel there to complete a vow he had made to God those thirty years before (Genesis 28:20-22). He is also being taken back to Bethel spiritually by the Lord to rediscover his spiritual anchor point that he has lost in this crisis.

God directs Jacob back to Bethel because that was the time and place in which God first Jacob that He was present in his life circumstances even though he did not recognize it. It was the place where Jacob had vowed to the Lord that He would embrace Him as his own God if God would be present with him, protect him, and provide for him. His vow then, was that he would return one day to Bethel and worship God there if God would care for him. For the following twenty years Jacob was with Laban in another land and could not fulfill that vow. But, for the last ten years, Jacob had been back in the Promised Land since leaving Laban, and was near Bethel, yet he had not bothered to fulfill his vow to the Lord. This Word from the Lord to Jacob was the Lord's reminder to Jacob, that even though Jacob had not been faithful to fulfill his vow to the Lord, nevertheless the Lord had been faithful to be present, protect and provide for Jacob. This Word reminds Jacob of God's protection over his life for the last thirty years and calls his heart to trust that the Lord will also protect him in this present crisis just like He has always done before. Rather than punish him in his moment of great weakness of faith, the Lord gives this Word to strengthen his weak faith and get him back on track.

35:2-4 - "So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem."

The Lord had spoken to Jacob with a powerful Word for his own heart and life, but Jacob perceives that this message from God has implications and ramifications for not only him, but his entire household. The Lord did not command what Jacob concludes and requires of his household, but Jacob's requirement for them follows Biblical principles. What we see in play here is that what God speaks to one regarding relationship with Him has application for us all. That principle continues to affect us today. This is why we are still reading the story of Jacob's story as well as all the other Bible characters and gaining wisdom and understanding for our own relationship with the Lord today. The underlying principle is the consistency of God in covenant relationships. If God treated His people according to whim then we could learn nothing from how He treated Jacob. But, because we believe God is consistent in His purpose for all of His people, what He said and did with Jacob bears great significance for us just like it did for Jacob's household.

The call to return to Bethel carried an implication of the need for spiritual purification. Jacob called his household to cleanse themselves spiritually and to symbolize that cleansing with a physical washing and change of clothing. We later see this pattern used by the Lord when He calls the people to worship at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:10). The spiritual cleansing that Jacob requires of his household is the putting away of "the foreign gods which are among you." There are two problems exposed in this. One problem is that in spite of Jacob's covenant with God, some of his household members have kept their own idols with them in their journeys. The second and greater issue is that Jacob as the head of the household has known about the presence of these idols within his household and tolerated them. This again shows the previous lack of strong spiritual leadership by Jacob. He has maintained his own relationship with the Lord, but has not been very concerned or very effective in leading his family and servants into the fullness of their own relationship with the Lord. Now, with this new Word from the Lord, Jacob takes the spiritual lead and strips his household of their idols, charms and talismans. He proceeds to bury them so that they household will complete the journey to Bethel as a cleansed people.

35:5 - "As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob."

God never directly spoke to Jacob about his fear of being attacked and destroyed by the angered inhabitants of the land. His Word to return to Bethel we saw carried an implied reason for Jacob to trust rather than fear. As they journey, what they discover along the way is that God has gone ahead of them and created a safe path for them. The cities that Jacob had feared would rise up in vengeance for Hamor and Shechem, instead leave Jacob a wide berth. The inhabitants of the land have heard word of what the sons of Jacob did to the one city of the Hivites and they are terror stricken in fear that they will be the next victims. We should recognize the hand of the Lord in this development for Jacob's sake. God has reversed the source of Jacob's greatest fear. God is further driving home the point to Jacob's heart that He should be trusted. God has caused the people that Jacob most feared to instead fear him!

35:9-12 - "Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name." Thus He called him Israel. God also said to him, "I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, And kings shall come forth from you. The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, And I will give the land to your descendants after you."

God again speaks to Jacob and gives him his greatest revelation of God yet. God had previously appeared to Jacob twice in the first dream at Bethel thirty years before, and then at night in the form of the mysterious man that he wrestled throughout the night. Now, God appears to him while he is awake, without any mystery to cloak His appearance. This third appearance of the Lord comes with a communication that does not really give any new information to Jacob, but serves the purpose to confirm and establish God's purpose for him. God had changed Jacob's name years before to Israel to signify God's plan to transform his character from a manipulator to a man who trusted in the rule of God above all. Yet, in the intervening years we have seen Jacob waver back and forth between his former identity of Jacob and his new identity of Israel. Now God reminds him that he is no longer Jacob but Israel.

When we are called into covenant relationship with the Lord in our salvation we undergo a similar change of nature and character. The New Testament use the term "old self" (Romans 6:6) to describe the dramatic spiritual change that we undergo when we are born again. True salvation is much more than adding a few new religious beliefs to an essentially unchanged life. Covenant relationship with the Lord transforms us. But, while there is an initial change at the moment we are born again, there is also the ongoing change process that follows in which we progressively grow in the likeness of Christ. God renaming Jacob as Israel, and

then taking him through a series of circumstances that force him to grow is an Old Testament picture of this spiritual growth process that we all experience in our own walk with God. Theologians call this sanctification. It means to grow more holy. What we see in Jacob - Israel is reflected in our growth. Jacob grows more holy, not because he is naturally inclined toward holiness, but because God is committed to making him more holy. Jacob's weaknesses and failures are real issues in his spiritual growth curve, but overshadowing it all is God's mercy and grace which carry him always forward toward the goal.

Genesis 36

36:6-12 - "Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom. These then are the records of the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir. These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz the son of Esau's wife Adah, Reuel the son of Esau's wife Basemath. The sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho and Gatam and Kenaz. Timna was a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz and she bore Amalek to Eliphaz. These are the sons of Esau's wife Adah."

This chapter is dedicated to a detailed description of the of the lines that descended from Esau. When I was first reading the Bible many years ago, and came across passages like this chapter, I struggled to read it and struggled even more to find any reason why God chose for it to be included in His book. This chapter is similar to a few we will later encounter in Numbers, Chronicles, and of course in the genealogical records of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. The reason I struggled with reading these sections of God's Word is that there is very little in them that is of direct and obvious application to my life. In other words, I could not easily see what this information had to do with me if anything. My reading was somewhat immature and self focused, so if it did not obviously apply to me, I would tend to just quickly skip over it in my rush to "get to the good stuff." As I grew in my reading of God's Word, I eventually learned that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;" (II Timothy 3:16). I learned to slow down in reading this kind of passage and trust that God has included it for good reason, even if that reason is not immediately apparent.

An important element emphasized in this section is the final separation between Jacob and Esau. They were twins from birth who had struggled with each other from the womb. Their life stories had led up to the two key moments in which

Jacob had taken Esau's birthright and blessing. This led to a twenty year separation, in which both had matured and been blessed by God with families and prosperity. Then, there was the reconciliation with a warm greeting and weeping. After burying their father Isaac together, Esau now leaves the Promised Land forever. Their prosperity has grown to such an extent that, like Abraham and Lot, they must separate or herds will suffer. From a natural perspective we might expect Jacob to be the one to leave and find another land in which to settle, because he already has lived elsewhere, and Esau at this point is the stronger tribe of the two. We are meant to interpret Esau's choice to leave for Seir as the influence of God upon his heart. In Esau's decision, we see the Lord honoring His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them this Promised Land.

We are also introduced here to two key names that we will meet again in the later story of Israel. The names are Edom and Amalek. It is declared here that "Esau is Edom", and that Amalek is the grandson of Esau. Edom and Amalek will later stand in strong opposition to the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel in the Exodus as God brings the Israelites into the Promised Land after delivering them from Egypt. It shows us that while Esau leaves Jacob peacefully, the struggle between them that began in the womb is never fully resolved. Jacob is chosen by God to fulfill His purpose, and Esau is chosen by God to stand in opposition to that same purpose even throughout his descendant's generations.

36:20 - "These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan and Shobal and Zibeon and Anah,"

This verse gives the history, not of Esau and his descendants, but of Seir and his descendants. Seir is not descended from Abraham, but is mentioned here because his people are the inhabitants of the land of Seir before Esau arrives with his tribe. Once Esau arrives, he takes dominion over this region. We are given additional details of this later in this passage from Deuteronomy. "The Horites formerly lived in Seir, but the sons of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, just as Israel did to the land of their possession which the LORD gave to them." (Deuteronomy 2:12). There are two points worth noting from this. First, while Esau is no longer blessed with the birthright and blessing of the covenant of Abraham and Isaac, he has not been forgotten by God. Esau is blessed and grows eventually into several nations and kings. In particular, God had promised to bless those that blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the way he finally treated Jacob, Esau had blessed him and so now God causes Esau to be blessed through Jacob.

There is also a very important principle of history displayed here that people still have difficulty grasping to this day. The principle is that only God has the right to determine habitation of land in this world. There is an old saying that "possession is nine tenths of the law." In the way all people groups of history perceive their place in history they all believe that possession is 100% of the law. What I mean

by that is people that have settled in a region for any length of time begin to see themselves as the rightful owners of that land. In their perspective it belongs to them, and that no one has the right to take it from them. However, the testimony of the Bible is that this world and all of its land ultimately belongs to God. He blesses peoples, tribes and nations with the privilege of inhabiting certain portions for particular times, but they have no "right" to always stay there that supercedes God's purpose. God determines where each people will live and for how long. If they exceed the limit of sin and rebellion God toward Him that He determines, then He will move in history to displace them. Here God does so with the people of Seir and uses Esau to accomplish it. Paul refers to this principle of God's sovereign control of history. "and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation," (Acts 17:26).

36:31 - "Now these are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the sons of Israel."

God had years before promised to Abraham that there would be kings that would descend from him. "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you." (Genesis 17:6). The many kings of Israel's history will be part of the fulfillment of that promise, but Esau is also descended from Abraham and the kings that descend from Esau are the beginning of the proof that God had faithfully kept His promise. There is another subtle element here that we can draw from this passage. Edom, who represents the fleshly descendants of Abraham and Isaac develops as a nation more rapidly than Jacob and his descendants do. Edom seems to be blessed above Israel, at least for the next 300-400 years as Israel will end up enslaved in Egypt while Esau's descendants "live like kings". We should not misinterpret what God is doing by assuming Esau is more blessed than Israel just because they enjoy a better life for a time. God's deeper purpose usually develops more slowly for His chosen people.

Genesis 37

37:9-11 - "Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground? His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind."

The two dreams that Joseph had are the Lord's indication that He had chosen Joseph from among his brothers to fulfill a special purpose. From the description

is seems that Joseph does not yet understand the full implications of God's call on his life. He shares the first dream with his brothers and the second dream with his father and brothers. He does not claim any particular significance for the dreams but it is clear that he senses there is important about them. His brothers and even Jacob do not hesitate in seeing a specific meaning to them. The dreams are from the Lord and prophetically portray what will eventually take place in all of their lives, but while Jacob and the brothers understand the implication of the symbolism of the dreams, they do not acknowledge them as being from the Lord. The reaction of the brothers is to see Joseph's dreams as an expression of his desire to dominate them. They added the dreams to their growing list of reasons to hate Joseph. Jacob also has an unfavorable response to the dreams, and rebukes Joseph as if it was his own mind that produced the dreams and exposed a secret desire on his part to take charge of the family. Jacob, of course, should have known better than to quickly dismiss these dreams because of his own experience years earlier of the Lord speaking to him through a spiritual dream. Perhaps that remembrance is what gave Jacob pause before completely dismissing the dreams and led him to keep in mind what Joseph had dreamed.

This is another of many Bible examples of God communicating on certain occasions to His people in a dream. What we should take from this is to not be like Joseph's brothers and even Jacob and miss what God may be saying through dreams. The truth is that God is God over all of our life 24 hours a day. He is not God over only our waking hours. He can and may communicate to our hearts even through our dreams (Job 33:14-18). This does not mean that every dream we have is a message from God. But, if we clearly remember a dream the next day, we should not be quick to dismiss it. It is wise to pray and ask the Lord whether He is wanting to communicate something to us through the dream we remember. As a new believer 28 years ago I had a series of dreams in which I was standing at a podium teaching and preaching God's Word to various groups of people. When I first had the dreams I was troubled by them since I could not imagine myself in such a circumstance in a public speaking role. Years later, after becoming a pastor and declaring God's Word in front of various groups I was able to look back and recognize that God had begun to prepare my heart for my assignment from Him through those dreams.

37:18-20 - "When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"

We have already seen that Jacob has not proven to be the wisest of fathers. His example as a father was Isaac, and he grew up with his own father favoring his older brother Esau. Jacob knew first hand how not being the favored son would feel. He also knew from his own rivalry with Esau how natural favoritism by a

father can produce jealousy, envy, and even hatred among siblings. Yet, in spite of his own experience, when Jacob is now in the father's role, he neglects the lessons of his own past, and repeats the mistake of his father Isaac. By showing Joseph such blatant favoritism, he lays a stumbling block at the feet of his other sons. There was a growing resentment in their hearts toward Joseph. First there was him being treated better by their father. Then there was the incident where Joseph exposed their sin to their father in what they saw as him being a tattletale or snitch. Then, Joseph had the audacity to wear the special tunic Jacob had made for him and flaunt it in their face. The last straw for them was the pair of dreams in which Joseph ruled over them and the entire family.

As Joseph approaches them in the wilderness, far from their father's protection, they see the opportunity to rid themselves of what they had come to believe to be the source of all their problems. As Joseph comes to them they identify him as literally "this master of dreams." Their words were meant as a sarcastic and derogatory insult. Yet, God was later going to give to Joseph a gifted ability to hear and interpret the dreams of others. That ability to interpret dreams would later be the very means that God will use to exalt Joseph to a position in Egypt of awesome responsibility and prominence. Then, Joseph truly will be a master of dreams. Their insult also contains the seed of the truth and God's way of vindicating His chosen one. This is a pattern that will be played out many times in the far distant future. God's purpose for the One or ones He has chosen is misunderstood by fleshly and jealous people around them, and their insults find ironic fulfillment as God vindicates His purpose. They mocked Jesus from His virgin birth, to His miracles, to His teaching, to His death, to His resurrection, to His rule as God's Messiah. They mocked the early followers of Christ by calling them Christians as a term of derision. God's purposes are always mocked, but He will turn their mocking into greater glory for His Name as He vindicates His purpose in spite of those that oppose it.

37:23-25 - "So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt."

The hearts of Joseph's brothers had become calloused by their jealousy and hatred of him. We cannot indulge such seriously evil thoughts and inclinations without our hearts being scarred by them. After stripping the hated tunic, which was a symbol of Joseph's favor with Jacob, they threw him into a water cistern that was dried out. Immediately after committing such a wicked crime against their own brother and father, they are so unaffected in their conscience by what they have done that they sit down and eat a meal together. If their conscience had been functioning properly, they would have had no appetite for food right

after doing such a thing. That they were not deeply convicted and bothered by it is a strong indication of the distance they had already drifted from the Lord in their sin. While they ate, they were close enough to the cistern to hear Joseph. Even though there is no mention in this passage of Joseph's reaction from inside the cistern, we later learn from the brothers themselves how Joseph reacted. "Then they said to one another, "Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us." (Genesis 42:21).

Joseph did cry out to his brothers from the cistern. He was deeply distressed and pleaded with his own brothers to release him. While he pleaded with them, they sat and ate their meal undisturbed by his pitiful cries. The lesson here is all about the dangerous side effect of indulged sin. Sin hardens our conscience and heart. It destroys the ability of a once normal heart to sensitively feel the pangs of conscience that would ordinarily arrest us from crossing the boundary lines of righteousness. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:12-13). When a heart is hardened, that person may find themselves choosing and doing things that they would never have imagined themselves doing before.

37:35-36 - "Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard."

In all of the developments of chapter 37 we see unwise parenting by Jacob, jealous hatred by Joseph's brothers, and naive innocence by Joseph which when combined results in a family tragedy. From all that Jacob can see, God's blessing upon his life up until this event has now been ruined by the untimely death of his favorite son Joseph. As the readers, we know what Jacob does not know. Joseph is not dead, but like in a dramatic scene from a movie, at the exact moment Jacob's grief is inconsolable, Joseph is actually sold into slavery in Egypt to a master selected by God. As far as Jacob is concerned, God is completely missing in this most devastating moment of his life. Jacob is grieved to his depths, but fails to even mention the Name of the Lord in this, let alone turn to Him for comfort or wisdom. In this, Jacob's faith fails and he reacts more like the old Jacob, than he does the new Israel.

Thankfully, for all of us, as well as Jacob, God's involvement in this situation is not limited by Jacob's perspective or even his faith. Jacob does not see Him, but God's hand is upon this entire situation. God planned for Joseph to be sold to the Ishmaelites. God planned for Joseph to be taken to Egypt. God planned for Joseph to be sold into Potiphar's household. God planned all the developments

that will follow in Egypt as well. All of these plans will serve God's purpose and will ultimately bless Jacob and even the hateful sons that naturally speaking "caused" all this to happen. This is a deep lesson in God's sovereignty. Joseph, Jacob, and all his brothers will later learn from this of God's sovereignty, but right now all any of them can see is what is happening on the surface of the events. This great lesson is meant not just for them, but for us as well. We don't need to spend years in wasted fear, hatred, grief, etc., if we learn to look for God's sovereign hand behind the scenes in our own personal life stories.

Genesis 38

38:1-4 - "And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan."

This chapter detailing the beginning of the family line of Judah at first glance seems to be just a strange story without much redeeming spiritual value, but as we should expect there is more than meets the eye here. In the first verse we are told without explanation that Judah departs from his brothers and remains separated from them for a number of years. This is a hint of God's long range plan for the tribe that will descend from Judah. The Jews, who are the descendants of Judah will eventually be separated from the other tribes of Israel and will alone carry forward in history God's plan for the coming Messiah. Later, we will see Judah rejoin his brothers during the famine in their journey to Egypt, but this separation is an indication of what is to come in the distant future between the tribes.

We also see in Judah's decision to join with the daughter of Shua, that Jacob's parenting influence is once again exposed as weak at best. When God called Abraham as we have noted before, He made a point of declaring the importance of Abraham properly training his children after him "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Genesis 18:19). This shows the Lord's priority that His covenant representative train his children to insure that the following generations of the people of the covenant live in a way that represents the Lord as they should. When it came time for Abraham's son Isaac to marry this was Abraham's concern, "and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live," (Genesis 24:3). When it was time for Jacob to marry, here was Isaac's concern, "So Isaac called Jacob and

blessed him and charged him, and said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan." (Genesis 28:1). Now it is time for Judah, the son of Jacob chosen to be the ancestor of the Messiah, to be married, and he chooses as a wife a Canaanite woman. Jacob has failed here to effectively pass on to his son the spiritual standards he learned from his father and grandfather. The immediate fruit of this unwise decision by Judah is the birth of two wicked sons.

38:7-10 - "But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also."

[Parental Alert: for any parents sharing this study with their children you may wish to read ahead before reading out loud to determine whether the subject matter is appropriate for your child.]

This passage is on the list of the most difficult to understand for many Bible readers. The event it describes has been misinterpreted and misapplied over several generations by well meaning Christians. The misinterpretation has to do with what became known in earlier generations as Onanism. This term associated with the name of Judah's son Onan was chosen as a more polite way to refer in public to masturbation. The story concerns Onan not completing his sexual responsibility toward Tamar, but instead choosing to waste his seed on the ground. The resulting serious consequence of the Lord's displeasure resulting in Onan's death has traditionally been applied as the Biblical warning against masturbation. While the practice of masturbation has its own spiritual issues, this passage is not an example of it or a warning against it. The real focus of the story concerns an ancient cultural practice known as Levirate marriage. The principle later was a statute in God's Law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Its concern was for the continuation of an entire family line that would otherwise be lost. Knowing this, Onan selfishly chose to not support the family line of Judah with the hidden motive of wanting to keep the inheritance for himself that would have been given to Tamar's son. God responded to this rebellion against His principle and this disregard for the critical family line of Judah with a severe death penalty for Onan.

Onan is not the only son of Judah that lost his life prematurely by the Lord taking his life. Er, the firstborn of Judah was evil and the Lord took his life before Onan, even though we are not given the specific nature of his evil ways. What is meant to catch our attention is that the Lord ended the life of these first two sons of Judah. We should ask why, because these sons are not the only sinners in the world at this time. As the rest of the chapter unfolds we see even Judah participating in sin. There are two principles involved in the death of these first

two sons of Judah. The first principle is that God considers some sins more grievous than others. All sin is evil, but there are degrees of the expression of evil. These sons both committed particularly evil acts that rose to the level requiring a death penalty response from the Lord. The second principle is based upon a New Testament teaching of the Lord Jesus. "but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." (Luke 12:48). The principle is that God holds to a high standard those who are called to a high level of spiritual responsibility. Er was in the position to become the head of the tribe of Judah after his father which was the tribe chosen to bring the Messiah into the world. When Er died, Onan succeeded him as the next leader of the tribe. Both Er and Onan are warning examples of the responsibility that leaders bear in God's kingdom. God will hold leaders to a stricter standard (James 3:1).

38:24-26 - "Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again."

This complex story of the relationship between Judah and Tamar carries these important principles. 1) God may choose to teach us not to deceive others by allowing us to be deceived ourselves. When Judah's second son Onan died, he became fearful that his third son may suffer the same fate. Judah unrighteously promised his third son to Tamar when he had no intention to ever give her to him. He deceived her in this and required her to remain a widow without any real hope of ever marrying again. Tamar later deceived Judah regarding her identity as God's discipline on Judah for his having deceived her. Once Judah realized what had happened, the result was a measure of real repentance on his part. He no longer condemned her, but identified her actions as "more righteous" than his own. This change of tone on Judah's part was the evidence of the Lord's hidden hand in the entire circumstance to hold Judah accountable for his sin.

2) It is unrighteous to hold others to a stricter standard than the one we maintain for ourselves. When Judah first learned that Tamar was pregnant, his immediate conclusion was that she had sinned as a harlot. This was because he had left her in a situation in which she was not free to marry another man other than his third son. Judah's immediate reaction to the news was to pronounce a death penalty upon her, and he chose a method of punishment in burning that was only used for the worst crimes. In other words, Judah held Tamar to an extremely strict standard of righteousness. He did not hesitate even for a moment due to the

knowledge of his own sin of going in to a harlot. His own sin was ignored, and her sin was magnified. In this, Judah is a classic example of this kingdom principle. "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5). The Lord used Tamar to expose the hypocrisy of Judah.

38:27-30 - "It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah."

There is one more lesson for Judah in this circumstance. Years before, Judah had participated in the betrayal and sale of his brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt. At this point, even though years have passed, Judah has never yet repented for his sin against Joseph. He remains responsible for not accepting God's choice to exalt his younger brother Joseph within the family because it served God's purpose to do so. Now, when his own sons by Tamar are born, the twins are born in a notable way. The one who was technically the firstborn was Zerah, because his hand came out first and the scarlet cord was tied to it. However, his brother Perez managed to push his way past Zerah and was born before Zerah. Perez who was technically the younger brother became the brother who took the lead in the tribe of Judah. It was through Perez that the Messiah would one day be born. "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram." (Matthew 1:1-3). The lesson for Judah from his own family is that it is God Who chooses who will take the lead in His plans.

Genesis 39

39:2-6 - "The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance."

Joseph has grown into an excellent young man in spite of the unexpected and challenging circumstance he has had to endure. Joseph had strong reason to fully expect his life to be one of continuing and growing blessing because he was the favored son of the man most favored by God. He certainly did not expect to have his life direction suddenly and dramatically altered and to end up a slave in an Egyptian household. We could expect Joseph's heart to be at least vulnerable to questioning why the Lord has allowed all this to happen to him, or raising a complaint about his circumstance. Yet, not once in this situation do we hear a single word of murmuring, grumbling or complaining from Joseph. There is no hint of resentment toward the Lord or Joseph indulging in feeling sorry for himself.

Instead, Joseph embraces his new life and the assignment given to him with zeal. His attitude, words and actions all reflect true faith and a character that has already been refined by the difficulty he has passed through. Joseph is an example of the way the Lord wants all of His children to handle the various adversities we encounter in our own lives. "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world," (Philippians 2:14-15). The Lord honors both His covenant promise to Joseph (Genesis 12:3), and Joseph's faithfulness by giving Joseph great favor with Potiphar. Favor is a blessing of the Lord in which He causes key people in our lives to see us in a favorable light. God not only blessed Joseph, He also blessed Potiphar for Joseph's sake. This pattern is repeated from the way God blessed Laban for the sake of Jacob.

39:9-12 - "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her. Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside."

Joseph's faithfulness to the Lord is now tested to the limit. The Lord's blessing upon his life has not resulted in Joseph avoiding trials and difficulty, and now it becomes clear that walking with the Lord does not completely eliminate temptation either. If anything, the one who walks with the Lord faithfully will have to face and conquer great temptations as modeled for us by Jesus Himself (Matthew 4:1-11). God's purpose for us is that we do not sin. However, it is also His purpose for us that we face temptation. The Lord exposes us to temptation, but does not actually tempt us (James 1:12-15). The temptations come from the evil one, but God allows us to be tempted because it is necessary living in this fallen world for us to learn how to resist sin and walk by His grace in righteousness. We can be confident that even in moments of greatest temptation like Joseph faced, that the Lord is with us and He will always provide a way of escape for us (I Corinthians 10:13).

In this situation, Joseph had every justification available to his heart to use had he chosen the wrong path. He had endured undeserved hardship. As a slave now he was not free to take a wife for himself. He undoubtedly had natural desires and urges like any young man. He was also under the authority of the wife of Potiphar and she literally commanded him to be with her. He could have excused himself for a moment of sin, but instead Joseph held to righteousness and faithfulness. This test was particularly difficult as the enemy at work in Potiphar's wife emboldened her to do more than entice and urge Joseph. This day she took hold of his garment. He remembered the Lord in this moment and his ability to resist the temptation was in his commitment to not "do this great evil and sin against God." It is important for us to notice that Joseph's strength to resist was found in the relationship he already had with the Lord before he arrived at the moment of temptation. A weaker relationship with the Lord would have left him too weak to resist. The Lord did provide Joseph with a "way of escape", which was in remembering Him, and then literally fleeing the scene. Believers need to learn to not linger at the scene of temptation thinking that they can be strong enough to resist. Joseph did the wise, if awkward thing, and pulled away from her so hard that his garment came off. "Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." (II Timothy 2:22).

39:17-21 - "Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside." Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned. So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer."

Joseph's commitment to honor the Lord, remain faithful to Him, and do the right thing is met with an unexpected development. Doing the right thing in the eyes of the Lord does not instantly make Joseph's life easier. It makes his life much harder. This pattern alone has caused more confusion consternation for believers than just about anything else in the way God deals with our lives. We would expect that since we are doing what is pleasing to God and what He requires us to do, that He will make sure we are immediately rewarded for our efforts. Surely God will vindicate Joseph in this situation and bring to the light that it was all Potiphar's wife and that he is completely innocent. God would never allow someone that belongs to Him to be falsely accused let alone falsely mistreated would He? He would and at times He does. If we expect to always be instantly blessed for doing right, we will face inevitable disappointment and disillusionment.

God appoints for Joseph in this circumstance misunderstanding, false accusation, false imprisonment, undeserved damage to his reputation, and more ill treatment. All of this is on top of the undeserved mistreatment he had to previously endure at the hands of his brothers. What can God possibly be doing in this continuing and mounting trial upon Joseph? God's purpose for Joseph is still hidden at this point in his story, but it is twofold. God is using the trial to shape Joseph's character for a great calling, and God is using these exact circumstances to maneuver Joseph into position for purpose of God to be fulfilled at the right time. Again, I am impressed that Joseph responds to this second great trial without a single note of grumbling, murmuring or complaint. Once he is imprisoned, the Lord does show His kindness to Joseph. Not the kindness of freedom and vindication yet, but the kindness of favor in the eyes of the chief jailor. This is enough of an indication of the Lord's involvement that Joseph should know that his circumstance does not mean that God has abandoned him, but rather is intending to somehow use him in this situation.

39:22-23 - "The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper."

The relationship established in prison with the chief jailor, and Joseph's growing responsibility there reveals a pattern for his life that shows both the Lord's assignment for him, and is a clue of what the Lord is preparing Joseph for in the future. This is now the third life circumstance in which Joseph rises from relative obscurity to a prominent position of great responsibility. The first was that Joseph was entrusted to be his father's Jacob's representative toward his brothers in the administration of the family business even though he was the youngest of the brothers. The second was Joseph beginning as the newest slave in Potiphar's household and rising to the trusted position of manager of the entire house. The third now is arriving in prison as the newest prisoner and quickly rising to the assistant to the chief jailor and responsible for all of the other prisoners. All three of these developments were evidence of God's plan for Joseph and provided the necessary training for that greater responsibility when the time arrived. If you find yourself engaged in work or responsibilities that do not seem greatly significant to you, don't make the mistake of failing to see God's purpose in placing you there. He may have something greater than your present circumstance planned for you, but where you are now is designed by Him to train you for where He intends to take you.