

JANUARY 17

Genesis 37, 38

Welcome back to chapter 37 of Genesis. The beginning of the riveting and critical story of Joseph. If you are looking closely, you may already be seeing those parallels to Jesus' life. In this story note that Joseph is more highly honored than any of his brothers;

- his faithfulness in communicating divine revelation which primarily relates to himself may have not been the most sensitive thing to do, and it causes his brothers to hate him - this reminds me of Jesus in John 1:12, "*He came unto his own but his own received him not*";
- you may have also noticed that his father does not understand the revelation but "*kept the matter in his mind*"- just as Mary kept in mind all those things and pondered them in her heart;
- his father Jacob sends his own son to the keepers of his flock and when they see him approaching they plot to kill him. That of course, calls to mind the parable Jesus told in Matthew 21 in which a father sent his son to the keepers of the vineyard; Joseph was stripped of his robe, so was Jesus;
- Joseph was sold for the price of a slave - 20 pieces of silver, Christ, of course, was sold for 30 pieces of silver;
- God is behind all that occurs providentially in ordering the suffering of his servant so that his people can be saved. That is a fair summary of the life of Joseph and also a fair summary of the life of Jesus. As the story unfolds there will be other parallels as well, but these are surely sufficient to enlighten us as to the reason that many see Joseph as a type of Christ.

Joseph is 17 years of age at the time this shocking change of lifestyle occurs for him. He goes from being the favored son of his father's house to being a slave in the household of Potiphar, an official in Pharaoh's court in Egypt.

Now, we need to be aware as we read the account of Joseph's life that something quite important is occurring at this point in the progress of revelation. God is working out His promise to Abraham, and the focus here will shift dramatically in the lifetime of this one man from God dealing with an individual man, as He did with Abraham and Isaac, (as opposed to Ishmael) - Jacob (as opposed to Esau,) to God dealing with a nation - the Nation of Israel, which Joseph will take down into Egypt as an extended family or clan, but which will emerge from that unlikely incubator as a nation of people some two million strong.

The writer of Genesis leaves us in no doubt that Joseph's whole life is being worked out according to a Divine plan, and that the whole exile in Egypt is part of that plan, not only for Joseph, but also for the Hebrew nation - the heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant. You will remember we noted in Chapter 15, as God was making the covenant with Abraham, he told him that his descendants would be enslaved in a country not their own for 400 years until the iniquity of the Amorites was

complete, and that afterwards, God would punish the nation they would serve as slaves, and they would return to Canaan.

Though Joseph could not have known it as he entered slavery in Potiphar's household, he was fulfilling the perfect plan of God for the preservation and establishment of the Hebrew nation.

Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob, comes off the best in the account given us in chapter 37. It was his sincere intent to deliver Joseph back to his father. Perhaps this was because as the eldest son, he felt the weight of responsibility for his younger brother more than the others. It is also possible that after the sordid incident reported in chapter 35, when he slept with his father's concubine, Reuben was looking for a way to get back into his father's good graces. In any case, upon learning that in his absence the brothers had sold Joseph into slavery, Reuben is genuinely distressed and evidences that in the traditional fashion of tearing his clothing. He is not sufficiently repentant, however, to tell Jacob what really happened, so for a great many years he and his brothers will carry a very guilty secret.

It's ironic, isn't it that Jacob, who once perpetrated a horrible deception upon his father by killing a kid from the flock of goats, is now the victim of a very similar deception perpetrated upon him by his sons. What goes around comes around or to say it more biblically, *"Whatever a man sows that will he also reap."* Be careful what you sow!

I want you to notice that the Joseph story begins in chapter 37, which is sandwiched in between the record of Esau's clans and the sad story of Judah and Tamar. I believe that one of the reasons for this is to help us understand why God had to send Israel into Egypt in the first place. Joseph's difficulties were, of course, God's way of preparing for the whole family of Jacob to go to Egypt, and His purpose in sending the whole family there was to provide a place in which it could develop into a nation in safety. I know that may sound strange in light of the fact that after Joseph died, they were enslaved, but chapters 36 and 38, along with the account we read earlier of what happened in Shechem, are pretty good indications of what would have happened if they had not gone down into Egypt.

Moving into Chapter 38 - the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar, is another clear indication of what would have happened - indeed what was already happening - before God sent Jacob's family down to Egypt. Intermarriage with Canaanite women was a huge temptation for Jacob's sons, and Judah, for one, had already succumbed to it. Keeping a pure worship of the one true God would have been exceedingly difficult in the instance of such relationships.

The fact that in the account of chapter 38, Tamar was mistaken by Judah for a "shrine prostitute," gives a clear picture of the state of religious affairs in the Canaanite culture, a picture which by the way is confirmed and greatly expanded by archaeological work in the land of Israel today. For Israel to stay in that

environment was a recipe for disaster, but in Egypt, where the culture discouraged intermingling with Hebrew 'guests', this danger of accommodation and assimilation did not exist.

Two quick points before we leave chapter 38. First, Tamar was more righteous than Judah. The Levirate customs of her culture gave her some legal rights that the family of her deceased husband was obligated to fulfill. In trying to avoid these responsibilities Judah would have condemned her to death, extreme poverty, or prostitution. We'll talk more about the "Levirite Laws" later. They figure prominently on the story of Ruth.

Second, if you read the genealogy of Christ recorded in Matthew 1, some really interesting names are recorded. One of these is Tamar. God arranged it so that Tamar's son Perez would be an ancestor of the Messiah. Why? Perhaps to vindicate this woman; perhaps to indicate long before hand that Jesus would be the Savior of all men, not just the Jews; Perhaps it is to demonstrate that the most unlikely people can be used by God. In this case a forgotten wife from a foreign culture who was all but cast away by the family of Judah – she was memorialized forever in the genealogy of Christ. This is all part of the ironic poetic brilliance of God!

This is Mark Ashton reminding you that God's word is powerful and active – and sharper than any two edged sword. May he use it to penetrate your heart this week!