

GENESIS

Lesson 34 - Chapters 37 and 38

Last week we just barely got started into Genesis 37. Before we did that, though, we looked in some depth at the genealogy of Esau, Jacob's twin brother, in chapter 36. And, we learned that Esau's descendants intermarried to a large degree with Ishmael's descendants, meaning that most of the people's of the Middle East, today, have some mixture of Ishmael's and Esau's blood in their veins. While it may be difficult for us to look through scientific and rational eyes and say that it is an almost natural outcome that the descendants of the two dispossessed sons of the Patriarchs, Ishmael and Esau, would be in constant opposition to the descendants of the chosen and blessed sons of the Patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, the fact is that is exactly what has occurred. Those modern day descendants of Ishmael and Esau carry a hatred for the modern day people of Jacob (Israel) that is both historical AND spiritual in origin.

NAS Genesis 27:38 *And Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father." So Esau lifted his voice and wept. 39 Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, "Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, And away from the dew of heaven from above. 40 "And by your sword you shall live, And your brother you shall serve; But it shall come about when you become restless, That you shall break his yoke from your neck."*

Notice that last verse..... "but it shall come about (Esau) when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck".

This is what is going on in front of our eyes, displayed day after day, on our TVs. Esau, the Palestinians, is restless; they don't want to be under Israel's yoke....which is how they see themselves. And, they are in process of breaking that yoke from their necks and having their own sovereign nation. And, they will succeed....for a time. But, as I've told you in past lessons, all we see happening in the Middle East today, is a result of God's division, election and separation between Isaac and Ishmael, and then between Esau and Jacob; and it is also the result of these prophetic blessings that happened 3500 years ago and more. And, no amount of peace overtures and UN councils, and treaties, and resolutions, is going to bring this to a happy ending. See.....God's plan is not that He'll give men a chance to work it out and if we can't, THEN He'll intervene (although, in fact, that IS the theology of some thoroughly confused denominations). This will ONLY be worked out WHEN God intervenes.

A few days ago, someone said to me that if it is true that all that is happening in the Middle East MUST happen, and that the only hope for peace is not manmade but rests entirely in the return of our Messiah, why should we take sides with Israel and against the Palestinians or the

Muslims, or Iran, or whoever is trying to destroy Israel? Why should we even pay much attention at all as to what is going on, other than out of curiosity, because it is all destined to happen, anyway? Well, that person had a good point. Jesus Himself said that the end would not come, and He would not return, until all the things that must happen, DOES happen. So, what is our role in all this, as followers of Yeshua? In a way, this is a time of testing for us. God DOES choose sides, because He makes the divisions that CREATE sides; and He demands that all mankind choose one side or the other. Are we for Yeshua or against Him is where the first and most important choice lays. As Believers, we are called to trust God and His word. But, our choosing doesn't end with Yeshua. The next most important spiritual choice for us is where we stand on Israel, and His people the Jews. Yehoveh made it clear that those who bless Israel (the land and the people) will be blessed, and those who curse Israel will be cursed. God does not tolerate neutrality. Christ says in Revelation "I would rather you were hot or cold, but you are tepid so I spit you out of My mouth". All one has to do is read the Holy Scriptures to know what choice is expected of us. Yet, just as Moses commanded Israel "not to hate Esau your kinsmen", we're not to hate those who side against Israel. We don't have to hate the Muslims and the Palestinian people in order to side with Israel.

Well, as the era of the Patriarchs comes to a close, Chapter 37 presents us with Joseph, the 11th son of Jacob; and Joseph picks up where the Patriarchs left off. Joseph will be the focus of the remainder of Genesis.

Let's read Genesis 37 from the beginning.

READ GENESIS 37 all

In verse 2, we're told that 17-year-old Joseph brings back a bad report about certain of his brothers and gives it to his father; in other words, he tattled on them. Anybody here have a younger brother or sister that just couldn't wait to find SOMETHING to run and tell mom and dad about, on you? Well that's the situation here. Notice something else: these particular brothers who were tattled on, were not the sons of Jacob's legal wives Leah and Rachel; they were the sons of Jacob's two concubines, Bilah and Zilpah. That could not have helped but cause additional stress and strain on the relationships between all the sons of Jacob, who were born by 4 different women. Imagine the problems in this family.

But, there is also a subtle change in family status that shows up in the Hebrew: because, for the FIRST time, Bilah and Zilpah.....Jacob's concubines.....are now called ish'ishah....which is a term usually only applied to a LEGAL wife. Now, I can't say it with 100% assurance, but unless this is a redaction or an anomaly, it appears that Jacob has made Bilah and Zilpah full wives. The Rambam, Maimonides, says that at the time of this story of Joseph, both Leah and Rachel were deceased. If this is correct.....and it is more probable than not that it is.....then we understand WHY Jacob would have elevated the status of Bilah and Zilpah; and we also understand all the more the terrible turmoil that existed within Jacob's family at this time.

Now, because Jacob had always favored Rachel, he also favored the 2 children she gave him: Joseph and Benjamin; and especially Joseph. We are told in V3 that Jacob loved Joseph

more, and apparently made no bones about making that fact very clear. And, he further signified Joseph's favor by giving him what most Bibles will say is a "coat of many colors". Actually, it was not a coat at all, but a tunic. In Hebrew, *k'tonet passim*. But, there are many types of tunics, ranging from the ordinary to special. Even more, there was a tunic that went from neck to ankle, and all the way to the wrists on the arms. This was a royal tunic and the form of the Hebrew used here says that, indeed, this was a royal robe. Imagine, now. This wasn't that Joseph got a nicer coat than his brothers. It was that his father virtually anointed him as a prince, and had him prancing around amongst his brothers in that kingly garb. The jealousy and envy this was bound to cause was going to wind up nearly costing Joseph his life. In fact, the envy grew into hatred of Joseph to the point, as it says in V4, that his brothers could not speak to him in friendly or civil terms. Jacob's actions in his almost obsessive preference of Joseph made Joseph not fit in with his brothers. Literally, the translation is "they could not get themselves to address him unto peace". Much like it is in the Middle East today, back in that time, the common greeting was "peace be with you". What this verse is saying, is that these brothers couldn't even bring themselves to even offer Joseph the standard "peace be with you" greeting, because they loathed him so much. It's within this context that we must view what is about to transpire.

Somehow Joseph was at least somewhat aloof to all this rage and hatred that surrounded him. And, in youthful naivety, Joseph didn't have the good sense to keep his mouth shut on an occasion in which he had a dream the meaning of which was exciting to him, but most certainly NOT to his brothers.

In this dream, he sees these sheaves, bundles, of harvested grain of some sort. There were 12 of these sheaves, and 11 of them were bowing down to the 12th. Now, picture this teenaged Joseph, standing there in his regal tunic, all full of himself, telling this story to his 10 older brothers who knew full well this dream's symbolism: that they would, someday, all submit to Joseph as their master!

Here we see how God will communicate to Joseph (in dreams and visions), as opposed to the more direct, audible, even 2 way conversations He had with the Patriarchs. But, we also need to understand that this was not unique to Joseph. Dreams and visions were standard ways that people of that era thought their god or gods communicated with them. And, people generally believed these prophetic visions. But, it was also understood that the personality and ambitions of the dreamer also played a role in the dream; therefore, a dream was kind of a hybrid thing: it was an oracle or a prophecy that was part god and part the aspirations of the person having the dream.

In verse 9, he has another dream, and once again he can't wait to tell everybody. The first dream he only told to his brothers; this dream he relates to his father, Jacob, as well. Now, he says, that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. They again knew full well what THAT meant. But, it was even more insulting because in that era, and actually right down to pagan religions of our day, the sun represented the father figure, and the moon the mother, and the stars their offspring. So, Joseph was now saying that not only would his brothers bow down in subservience to him, but so would his own mother and father! Jacob tries to rein Joseph's self-importance in a bit, by mocking him and saying ".....are we to come, I and your

mother.....and bow low to the ground to you?” Now his whole family must have thought Joseph was losing it and suffering from delusions of grandeur. In fact, it will turn out, these dreams were accurate; further, that dream interpretation was a spiritual gift from God for Joseph. By the way, this passage lends credence that Bilah and Zilpah had become wives for Jacob. Because, though Rachel was long dead before this incident, here we Jacob respond with “so you say I and your mother....should bow down to you”. Rachel was Joseph’s mother, but Bilah had been her handmaiden. Bilah would have had much to do with Joseph’s upbringing. If Jacob had elevated Bilah’s status to a full wife, it would have been customary in that era to refer to her as “Joseph’s mother”.

Apparently the flocks of the Israelite clan were at this time pasturing in the grassy fields and valleys surrounding Shechem, while the home base was in Hebron; and Joseph’s brothers were off tending the animals. I find it kind of interesting that Jacob and his sons apparently felt no compunction in going back to Shechem, considering that just a few years earlier, the King of Shechem’s son had raped Jacob’s daughter Dinah, and in retaliation the sons of Jacob had slaughtered every male resident of that city, and taken many of their widows and children for their own! Israel, Jacob, told Joseph to go to his brothers and check on their welfare. The reason for Jacob sending Joseph could well have been that he was concerned for his sons in light of that horrible incident. In the Middle East, the desire for vengeance can go on for generations.

Off goes Joseph, unaware of the precarious situation he was in. It was a journey of about 50 miles, and as he gets near Shechem, a man informs him that the flock had been there, but moved on to a place called Dothan. Two things: first, despite a few movie versions to the contrary, this man was only a man. The Hebrew word used was “ish”.....man. So, this was not an angel. Second, the place called Dothan means “two wells”. And, Joseph was about to have a close encounter with one of those wells.

The area of the two wells was hilly and lush. And, apparently from a vantage point atop one of those hills, the brothers saw Joseph coming towards them. Their hatred now overflowed, dear old dad was at least 3 days journey away, and even before Joseph reached them, they had decided to kill him. Verses 19 and 20 show us rather clearly what it was that finally put them over the edge: it was those dreams of Joseph that offended them to the point of murder. Let’s be clear: this is not only about jealousy and insult. These brothers believed, to some degree, that the dreams of Joseph being their master were true. If they killed Joseph, then the problem was solved.

Now, Rueben, the firstborn of Jacob and a son of Leah, intervened and suggested that they not kill Joseph by their own hands; rather, they should throw him in a pit.....with the idea being forwarded that Joseph would just starve to death in that pit and never be found. Now, the Bible tells us that Rueben’s real intention was not to have Joseph die, but to come back later and retrieve him after the brothers had left the area. Let’s remember here that Rueben, Jacob’s firstborn, was the one who attempted a coup against his father by sleeping with Bilah.....thereby claiming his father’s concubine as a prize. Although the coup failed.... and apparently after both Rachel and Leah died, Jacob ignored the fact that Bilah was considered “ruined” by tradition, and married her anyway.....Reuben was obviously still considered the top-dog among the

brothers. So, it's kind of interesting that Rueben, who had the most to lose with his father's special preference for Joseph, would be the one who tried to intervene and come to Joseph's rescue. Besides, as the eldest brother, Rueben would have been held responsible for the actions of the group.....and he was in enough hot water as it was, because of the Bilah affair.

It might be interesting to note, here, that the pit was in fact an empty well.....a cistern. Remember, the place where they were was called Dothan, two wells, and apparently one of those two wells was dry, for we are informed as much in V24. Dry wells and cisterns were commonly used as prison cells, even hiding places, in that day. So, Rueben's idea was hardly novel.

A couple of chapters ago, we got a pretty good glimpse as to the hardened individuals that these brothers were; that had slain all the males of Shechem after the men had been duped into being circumcised and were weakened by its aftereffects. Then, they went on a rampage to loot the helpless city, even carry off some of its women and children to use to increase their own families. So, it should be of little surprise that these same pitiless men would throw their teenage brother into an empty well to die, and then immediately sit down to have lunch as his pleas for mercy hung in the air!

No sooner had they begun to eat, than they spot a caravan of Ishmaelite, Arab, traders. With this, Judah, another son of Leah, has an idea: let's not allow him to die in the pit, let's SELL him to the Arabs, that way whatever happens to him from that point is beyond their control. What fractured logic. Besides, they can actually profit monetarily by getting rid of Joseph this way, so why not do it?

Incidentally, the idea that it would be such a great coincidence for these traders to come along, out in the middle of nowhere, is not at all farfetched. For one of the oldest trading routes of the Middle East ran from the spice producing region of Gilead, down through the area of Shechem (right where they were located), and then all the way into Egypt.

So, the brothers sold Joseph to the traders for 20 shekels of silver, the going rate for a male slave. Rueben returns, finds Joseph is gone, and "tore his garment", a sign of mourning. Now, this is not so much because he laments that Joseph is gone, but as the eldest HE will be held responsible by his father, Jacob. The brothers now put blood on the royal tunic they had stripped from Joseph before they threw him in the well, and take it to their father, asking, "is this Joseph's tunic"? Of course Jacob immediately identified the tunic as Joseph's. The blood on the tunic was proof enough to Jacob that a wild animal had killed and eaten Joseph, such that the brothers didn't even have to tell their lie. Rather, they offered their father comfort.

But, Jacob couldn't be comforted and gives us a little hint of how people of his day viewed death. He says rhetorically, that surely HE shall now die, and then go down into Sheol to be with his son Joseph. At that time, Sheol basically meant the grave, or the place of the dead. The concept of dying and going to heaven did not exist. As we have seen in recent chapters, there IS this concept of dying and "being gathered to your people", a statement associated with the nearly universal practice of ancestor worship. Exactly what that meant to the mind of these ancients is unsure; but certainly it carries with it the idea of some type of life after death,

even if they were unclear as to what that amounted to.

One little thing about this chapter that gives us a little trouble: it alternates between saying that the brothers sold Joseph to Ishmaelites, and to Midianites. Now, Ishmaelites were a different people than the Midianites. Ishmael was a son of Abraham, as was Midian. But, Ishmael's mother was Hagar, while Midian's was Keturah. Perhaps Ishmaelites had already become simply a general term for all the Semitic peoples living in the area of Arabia, and Midianites was more specific and precise identification. But, we're just not sure.

In any case, in the last verse we see Joseph arrive in Egypt and get sold to a very high Egyptian government official: Potiphar. Potiphar is a rather common Egyptian name, and it is found on Egyptian monuments from several dynasties. Written Pet-Pa-Ra, it simply means "dedicated to Ra" or "a gift to Ra"; Ra was the Egyptian sun god. Now, it is often debated as to exactly what office Potiphar held for Pharaoh, but it for certain had something to do with the military. Whether he was captain of the palace guard, or in charge of all of Pharaoh's armies, or simply the Pharaoh's chief bodyguard isn't fully clear. But, he was probably the 2nd most powerful man in Egypt.....for the moment, anyway.

Let's go to chapter 38, which kind of interrupts Joseph's story, momentarily.

READ GEN 38 all

The story suddenly shifts for a while, back to Canaan, and concentrates now on the brother whose suggestion it was to sell Joseph into slavery, Judah. Some of what we read in this chapter about sons marrying brothers' widows and so on is strange to us. For now, we just need to accept it as we read it, because this was simply normal custom for that time. Some of this chapter's importance for us is to help understand the mindset and customs of that era. It was vitally important to people then, and even in tribal cultures of today, that family bloodlines are carried on. We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

First, I'd like to focus on Judah, because it was out of Judah that would come the Jewish people and the eventual Messiah, Jesus. That is, Judah would now carry the torch as the continuing line of covenant promise that began with Judah's great-grandfather, Abraham. Judah was Jacob's 4th son, and was a son of Leah, one of the two legal wives of Jacob; Jacob's first 4 sons were all born by Leah. In trying to figure out why Judah was mentioned so prominently in the previous chapter, as the one who perpetrated the selling of Joseph, and now in this chapter as the one who thought he was sleeping with a prostitute, but instead, it was his widowed daughter-in-law, we need to take notice of the state of the family of Israel, the clan of Jacob.

It's entirely possible, and probable, that Judah had viewed his brother, or better, half-brother, Joseph as a rival (remember, Judah was born to Leah, and Joseph born to Rachel). Why a rival? Because, Judah may have seen himself as the one now due the firstborn blessing and all the wealth and authority that went with it. Why would he think that? As we'll see later, Jacob had decided that Reuben (even though he was Jacob's firstborn son) would not receive

the firstborn blessing, because Rueben had slept with Jacob's concubine, Bilah. And, Simeon and Levi, the next two in line, were also deemed unworthy to inherit the firstborn blessing Rueben forfeited, because they were the two who led the raid on the males of Shechem, killing them in revenge for the rape of their sister, Dinah.

So, it would naturally SEEM to follow that Judah, the 4th in line, would become the inheritor of the firstborn blessing. But, Joseph having been given the tunic of royalty and being openly favored by his father, appeared to indicate to Judah's mind that Jacob was leaning towards, or perhaps had already decided to bypass his first 10 sons (which included Judah), and give all rights and authority over the clan to Joseph; this, of course, would not have settled well with Judah.

Now, here's the irony of all of this: this wrestling for power (that the teenaged Joseph was utterly oblivious to) was but the beginning of the rivalry between Judah and Joseph...or, better yet.....their descendants. For these two brothers represent those people who would eventually become the two dominant tribes of Israel: Judah and Ephraim. Some of you are probably saying, wait a minute: I thought we were talking about Judah and Joseph, how did Ephraim jump in here? As we'll see in a few chapters, Ephraim, an Egyptian-born son of Joseph (that is, born to Joseph's Egyptian wife), would effectively replace Joseph as a tribe of Israel. In fact, Jacob would actually adopt Ephraim (and his older brother Manesseh) away from Joseph, for the purpose of replacing Rueben. And, centuries after that, Judah and Ephraim would become the two Israelite Kingdoms that were created after the split of the nation of Israel as it existed under David and Solomon. And, the descendants of Judah and Ephraim would find themselves warring against each other, off an on, until Assyria finally conquered the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim, and scattered the 10 tribes of Israel which constituted Ephraim throughout the far reaches of Asia.

So, beginning from the time Joseph was a young man, right on through to today, the descendants of Judah and the descendants of Joseph, by way of Ephraim, have been at odds with one another. It is interesting that in the prophecy of Ezekiel 37, that a time is foretold, that Israel will cease to exist as a nation, yet become a nation back in the land of it's beginnings. Further, that Judah and Ephraim will come back to the land, and be ruled under one king.....a descendant of King David.....for all time. Judah came back to the Middle East in 1948, reconstituted the nation of Israel in the same place it was before it was destroyed, some 2000 years earlier. But, what of Ephraim? Well those "Joseph" tribes have been making news of late. We have traditionally talked of "the 10 lost tribes of Israel" when referencing the tribes of Ephraim. Ephraim had NOT returned to Israel, but Judah had. Well, for several years now, large tribes of people, scattered around Asia and India have been claiming that THEY are some those lost tribes. After nearly 20 years of investigation, the Jewish Religious leadership of Israel has determined that indeed they ARE Ephraim, and they have convinced the Israeli government of that fact. So, as of March 2005, some of these tribes of Ephraim have been invited to immigrate to Israel. The prophecy of Ezekiel 37 is underway.

But, there is still a problem: the Judaism that modern Jews practice is different (to varying degrees) than the way these various Ephraimite tribes practice their beliefs in Torah. Just as it started with the man, Judah, and the man, Joseph..... and as it has happened since Judah sold

Joseph into slavery and he wound up in Egypt.... Judah and the Joseph tribes (Ephraim) are still at odds. Judah, the Jews, have told Ephraim that they MUST adopt the Jewish traditions and basically convert to Judaism in order to return to Israel. Those of Ephraim, who are desperate to come to Israel, have agreed. But, you can bet that this is not the end of the story. I suspect that as the return of Ephraim heats up, so will their resistance to completely adopting the ways of Judah.

Let's stop here for tonight.