



Treachery and Deception in Jacob's Family Genesis 37-38

Introduction

In Genesis Chapters 35 and 36, we saw the confirmation of God's faithfulness to His choice of Jacob and to His promises. As Jacob obeyed the command to return to Bethel, God Almighty appeared to him with a reaffirmation of the promises He had made concerning the land and his descendants. These promises, previously made to Abraham and Isaac, were now reconfirmed to Jacob, henceforth to be known as Israel.

God also kept his promises concerning Jacob's twin brother Esau, even though he was not of the chosen line. The genealogies of Genesis 36 record that God blessed Esau as the father of twelve sons and the progenitor of the expanding nation of Edom.

Although the remainder of the book of Genesis continues to move forward with a new generation of the children of Israel, God's faithfulness to Jacob (Israel) continues to be evident. Chapters 37 and 38 record significant events in the lives of Joseph and Judah.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 37-38

- I. Joseph is Chosen by God - Genesis 37:1-11**
- II. Joseph is Rejected by His Brothers - Genesis 37:12-30**
- III. Joseph is Mourned by His Father - Genesis 37:31-36**
- IV. Judah's Family Displays Corruption - Genesis 38:1-23**
- V. Judah's Line Continues Through Tamar - Genesis 38:24-30**

I. Joseph is Chosen by God - Genesis 37:1-11

In contrast to the growing and powerful family of Esau, Jacob and his family had settled as shepherds in Hebron, in the land of Canaan. The events recorded in this chapter reveal the beginnings of: (1) the process by which Israel became a nation and (2) the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, "*In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"

- A. Jacob Shows Favoritism to Joseph - Genesis 37:1-4

As a young man of seventeen, Joseph was loved by his father, "*more than all his children*", because he was a child of his old age. Joseph was not the youngest of

Jacob's sons (Benjamin was the youngest), but perhaps, in part, the favoritism had to do with the fact that Joseph was the firstborn of his beloved wife, Rachel. Furthermore, Joseph was a committed and faithful son, even to the point of informing on his brothers when they indulged in unacceptable behavior.

Jacob let his favoritism for Joseph be known by making him a tunic of many colors. This was probably a long robe such as the sons of noblemen wore. It symbolized selection as the future leader of the household, a position which would naturally have gone to the firstborn. Since the three oldest sons, Reuben, Simeon and Levi, had severely disappointed their father by their ungodly actions, Judah was next in line to inherit the blessing. However, Jacob's heart was drawn shamelessly to Joseph.

Application

Favoritism had long been a practice in Jacob's family. Isaac's favorite had been Esau and Rebekah's had been Jacob. Jacob's favored wife had been Rachel. Each time favoritism had caused problems. Jacob's blatant favoritism of Joseph resulted in hatred and hostility by his brothers.

Favoritism always wreaks havoc within a family and no one suffers more in the long run than the one who was the favorite. Will you ask God to show you clearly if this problem exists in your family? Will you prayerfully seek God's help to overcome any such tendencies?

- B. God Reveals His Choice Through Dreams - Genesis 37:5-11

Joseph had two dreams which he could not keep to himself. He naively shared them with his brothers and then with his father. Both of Joseph's dreams were revelations from God which symbolized Joseph's elevation to leader of the family. The meaning of the brothers' sheaves bowing down to his and of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him is quite clear. The interpretation was apparent to his brothers who hated him all the more and began to envy him. It was also troubling to Jacob who rebuked Joseph but continued to ponder the matter.

II. Joseph is Rejected by His Brothers - Genesis 37:12-30

After this, Joseph's brothers led the flock to Shechem

in search of pastures for grazing. Jacob sent Joseph to search for them and check on their well-being. Shechem was about fifty miles north of Hebron, but Joseph soon discovered that they had led the flocks about fifteen miles further to Dothan, a town on the caravan route between Syria and Egypt.

A. Joseph's Brothers Conspire to Kill Him - Genesis 37:15-20

As soon as they saw him coming, Joseph's brothers began scheming to kill the "*dreamer*" in order to keep his dreams from being fulfilled. They obviously did not consider the sovereignty of God as they devised their own schemes.

B. Reuben Saves Joseph from Death - Genesis 37:21-25

Reuben, the eldest, intervened, admonishing his brothers to "*shed no blood*". He persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, but put him, alive, into an empty pit. Reuben's plan was to rescue Joseph when he had an opportunity.

When Joseph caught up with his brothers, they stripped him of his colorful tunic and cast him into a pit (probably a dry well). As Joseph sat in the pit, his brothers sat down to lunch. Dr. Constable ([Notes on Genesis](#)) notes the irony that the next time the brothers would eat a meal in Joseph's presence, he would sit at the head of the table (Genesis 43:32-34).

C. Judah Plots for Profit - Genesis 37:25-28

As the brothers enjoyed their meal, a band of Ishmaelite traders passed by on their way to Egypt. These traders are also identified as Midianites in verse 28. Both groups were descendants of Abraham, the Ishmaelites through Hagar (Genesis 16:15) and the Midianites through Keturah (Genesis 25:2). Because of intermarriage, the names had become interchangeable.

Seeing an opportunity, Judah suggested that they sell Joseph to the band of traders. They did so, for twenty shekels (about eight ounces) of silver,

D. Reuben Laments the Loss of Joseph - Genesis 37:29-31

Reuben had been elsewhere at the time of the sale and grieved when he saw that Joseph was gone. As the eldest, he would be responsible to give an account to his father, so he joined with his brothers in their plan. They killed a goat and dipped Joseph's multicolored tunic in its blood, a deception to convince their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

III. Joseph is Mourned by His Father - Genesis 37:32-36

When Jacob saw the tunic, he mourned the loss of his favorite son. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, refused to be comforted and wept at the thought that he would never again in his lifetime see his beloved Joseph.

As Jacob mourned, Joseph was in Egypt, being sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard (37:36).

It is curious that Jacob did not entertain doubts about the bloody tunic and his sons' act of innocence. Did he so quickly dismiss Joseph's dreams? Did he not suspect there might have been foul play? Jacob allowed himself to be deceived. He had deceived his father with lies (Genesis 27:18-29), and now his own mode of sin had been used successfully against him.

Application

Lying is a sin. God does not categorize lies as "fibs" or "white lies". A lie is a lie. Probably every person on this earth has indulged in the sin of lying, but that is no excuse for us to lie and sin against God. Will you commit today to practice a habit of truthfulness?

IV. Judah's Family Displays Corruption - Genesis 38:1-23

This chapter is sometimes referred to as "The Judah Interlude". The events, which took place during the time Joseph was a slave in Egypt were filled with disloyalty, deception and immorality.

A. Judah's Departure - Genesis 38:1-2

We are not told why Judah left his family in the hill country of Hebron and moved to Adullam, a small city in the lowlands. Perhaps it had something to do with his guilt over the sin against Joseph. Perhaps he felt he needed a new start. But if he was looking for a new start, Judah's actions sadly did not show a newness of heart, for soon he joined himself to a Canaanite woman, Shua.

B. Judah's Sons - Genesis 38:3-11

Shua bore three sons for Judah's family line. Two of these sons were killed by the Lord.

1. Er - 38:3-7

The first, Er, was killed because he "*was wicked in the sight of the Lord*".

2. Onan - 38:8-10

Onan, the second son, was killed because of his rebellious refusal to carry out the custom of levirate marriage. In the ancient Near East, it was a brother's duty to assure the continuance of the family line of the deceased by marrying his widow and providing offspring. The firstborn son of such a marriage would provide an heir for the deceased and perpetuate his line. In this instance, he would also inherit the deceased man's rights as Judah's firstborn. Since Onan now held the position of firstborn (since Er's death), he had no intention of giving those rights away or sharing the inheritance with a child by Tamar. So he used Tamar for sexual pleasure and then "*emitted on the ground*". Onan's sin went beyond all standards of what was right and decent. It was an outrage against God, his family, his brother's widow, and his own body. It showed calculated selfishness and contempt.

3. Shelah - 38:11

Judah refused to risk the life of his third son, so he sent Tamar back to her father's house "*till my son Shelah is grown*". The next verses make it clear that Judah had no intention of following through with that promise. See 38:14. This was a sin against Tamar.

C. Judah's Indiscretion - Genesis 38:12-23

It was some years later when Judah's wife died and he went with his friend to Timnah to shear his sheep. Sheep shearing was an occasion for much festivity and involved pagan cultic prostitution.

1. Tamar's plan - 38:14-19

When Tamar heard where Judah was going, she devised a plan. Shelah had not been given to her as a husband and she remained a childless widow so she took matters into her own hands to assure her legal rights. On the surface, Tamar's actions may seem strange, and even immoral. But part of the custom of levirate marriage in ancient cultures was that the responsibility of providing a son could pass to the widow's father-in-law if there were no brothers to fulfill it. Tamar held Judah responsible for her family line. So she took off her widow's clothing, veiled herself, and waited by the side of the road leading up to Timnah.

As Tamar expected, when Judah passed by, he "*saw her,...thought she was a harlot*" and solicited her services. Tamar played the role of a prostitute by negotiating the price, a young goat from his flock. As a pledge of keeping the contract, Judah left his signet, cord and staff with the woman he presumed to be a harlot. The signet was a cylinder insignia, worn on a cord around the neck of prominent men. It was used to sign contracts

by rolling the insignia over the clay where the contract was written.

2. Judah's predicament - 38:20-23

After Judah returned home, he sent his friend to take the promised payment and receive back his pledge. However, after asking discreetly, he was unable to find "*the harlot who was openly by the roadside*". When given the news, Judah did not search further even though the young woman had his signet, cord and staff. His reputation would be called into question if he continued asking for the whereabouts of a prostitute. Judah was ready to forget the entire matter.

Application

What kind of a person do you think Tamar considered her father-in-law to be, thinking she could get away with her deceptive plan? What had she seen in Judah as she lived in his household as a young bride that made her think he would turn aside to a prostitute? Was it his actions, the jokes he told, or the ones he laughed at? Was it the way he sometimes looked at her or other women or the way he treated his wife, Shua? Or maybe it was the friends he chose. Often the things we consider small and inconsequential can speak volumes to others about our character. What do your words, actions and choice of friends tell others about you? What changes will you make in your life so you may be a godly example to others, especially to your children and grandchildren?

V. Judah's Line Continues through Tamar - Genesis 38:24-30

Forgetting and sweeping the matter under the rug was not as easy as Judah may have thought.

A. Judah Judges Tamar - Genesis 38:24

Three months later, Judah was informed that Tamar was pregnant. His response was, "*Bring her out and let her be burned.*" Notice Judah's double standard and hypocrisy. He was just as guilty of immorality as Tamar, but he did not hesitate to condemn her to death.

B. Judah Commends Tamar - Genesis 38:25-26

When Tamar confronted Judah with his signet, cord and staff, pointing to him as the guilty partner, he was quick to acknowledge, "*She has been more righteous than I.*" He recognized that her concern for the inheritance rights of the family had been more honest and honorable than his own. Although she had used deceitful and dubious means of obtaining an heir, she was to be commended for insuring the survival of Judah's line.

Dr. Constable ([Notes on Genesis](#)) sees Judah's response as genuine repentance. "He confessed his wrong and repented by ceasing from further sexual relations with his daughter-in-law." Furthermore, he sees this incident as being the beginning of a transformation in Judah's life which led to God's blessing his tribe and the children born of Tamar.

C. Tamar Gives Birth - Genesis 38:27-30

Tamar gave birth to twin boys. The midwife marked the out-thrust hand of one child, named Zerah, as the firstborn and was then surprised when the other twin was born first. Perez means "breach" or "pushing through", an apt description of his birth. Perez' genealogy is recorded in Ruth 4:18-22 and shows that he was an ancestor of King David through Boaz and Ruth. By God's grace and sovereign choice, he obtained a place in the line of Israel's Messiah (Matthew 1:3).

D. Tamar Secures a Place in Christ's Family - Matthew 1:3

It is also by God's amazing grace and mercy that Tamar found her place in the line of Christ, as recorded in Matthew 1:3. "Only divine grace could dare to take up these sorry elements of human life and use them for its own blessed purpose. There is nothing more marvelous than the power and possibilities of grace. Grace forgives, uplifts, transmutes, transforms, and then uses for its own glory. If any man sin we have the blessed assurance that grace will not leave us in the mire of degradation, defeat and despair (W. H. Griffith Thomas, [Genesis, A Devotional Commentary](#)).

Application

In this account of Judah, Tamar and Perez, we see that God's grace has the amazing power to transform lives broken by sin and despair into lives of beauty and usefulness within His divine plan. How has God transformed your life? How is He transforming it even today?