

GENESIS CHAPTERS 34, 35 AND 38 THE TRAGIC LEGACY OF JACOB'S SONS

Today we're going to look at three stories from the lives of Jacob's sons. Your reaction when you read these passages will probably be something like this: "Wow! I can't believe that's in the Bible!" The reason why the writer of Genesis, Moses, includes these rather unusual stories is to contrast the ungodly character of Jacob's older sons with the godly character of Joseph, his youngest son. We all know and love the story of Joseph. Starting next time he becomes the focus of our study. Rarely if ever do we study the passages that we'll be looking at today. Even our quarterly skipped over them. Frankly, these stories are disturbing. But they're here for a reason. They are not the kind of stories that uplift you and make you feel good about yourself. They are what my mother used to say about the book of Judges – they make you feel "icky." So let's see what God would have us learn from these three tragic tales.

Story #1 Genesis 34 – The Revenge of Simeon and Levi

Jacob's move to Shechem sets the stage for a series of setbacks. What should have been a period of blessing for Jacob and his family having returned back to the Promised Land instead turns into one misfortune after another.

READ Genesis 34:1-2

The bad guy in this story is Shechem, a Canaanite who just happens to have the same name as the city he lives in. He rapes Jacob's young teenage daughter Dinah. He forces himself upon her sexually and v 2 says that he humiliates her. This is a terrible crime! The Canaanite people are quite immoral as has been pointed out before and here we see one example of that.

READ Genesis 34:3-4

Notice that there is no remorse, no apology given by either Shechem for what he did to Dinah or by his father Hamor. Instead Shechem feels entitled. Being the son of a prince Shechem feels that he can do whatever he wants and have whoever he wants however he wants. He is an arrogant individual. Not only is he evil, but he's arrogant.

Well, what's Jacob's reaction when he finds out that his daughter has been raped?

READ Genesis 34:5

Jacob doesn't say anything. He waits for his sons to return home. Meanwhile, Hamor, Shechem's father goes to talk to Jacob...

READ Genesis 34:6-7

The reaction of Jacob's sons is what you might expect. They're angry, very angry at the evil that Shechem had perpetrated on their sister.

As you read on in v 8-12 you find out what Shechem's father has to say to Jacob and his family. There is no apology. There is no "please forgive my son for what he did." Instead he asks for permission for his son to marry Dinah, the girl he just raped! This is unbelievable. And then he goes even further asking that all Jacob's daughters be able to marry his sons. They can all become just one big happy family. What? Is this guy for real?

At this point the culprit himself, Shechem feels emboldened and has the audacity to ask for Dinah's hand in marriage after he had just raped her! You can't make this stuff up.

Well, the sons finally speak up...

READ Genesis 34:13

I wondered where they learned that from. Their father the master deceiver had apparently taught them well. In the verses that follow this is what they propose: "Look, we can't have our sisters, our daughters marry a bunch of uncircumcised men. You will all have to be circumcised first." They probably have to explain to these Canaanites what circumcision was

because it was a practice unique to Abraham's covenant descendants. This is an abuse of the rite of circumcision. It was supposed to be a sign for God's covenant people as a mark that set them apart from other people. It was not intended to be something imposed upon pagan unbelievers.

The men of Shechem agree and at the appointed time they show up at the gate of the city and are circumcised. We pick up the story in v 25...

READ Genesis 34:25-29

It would have been understandable for Jacob's family to have killed the man who was responsible for raping their sister. We could have understood that. But instead they killed every male in the city and then looted it. Their reasoning was so flawed. In v 27 it says, "Because they had defiled their sister." But it was only one man, Shechem who had defiled Dinah. Not every man in the city was guilty. So their so-called revenge here is a gross over-reaction. This is a classic example of the punishment not fitting the crime. Innocent people died because of Simeon and Levi's uncontrolled anger. While Simeon and Levi took the lead in this atrocity, all of Jacob's older sons evidently participated with them in the looting of the city.

After all of this happens Jacob scolds his sons...

READ Genesis 34:30

Jacob seems to be more concerned about his own tarnished reputation and for the safety of his family than he is for all the lives his sons ruined. To the very end Simeon and Levi show no remorse for what they did.

READ Genesis 34:31

They justify their actions. Again you could have understood if they took revenge out against the man Shechem. But to lash out violently against the entire city, well, there is no justification for that. This is a tragic atrocity and a severe over-reach. End of story.

Isn't that an uplifting story? Well, the second story is a little shorter and a little less messy. It takes place in Genesis Chapter 35. Let me set it up for you...

The massacre at Shechem forces Jacob and his family to leave. It's safe to say that they had overstayed their welcome. We read that God placed the fear, v 5, "a great terror" of Jacob's family in the hearts of the Canaanites. The group heads south. Jacob goes to Bethel which is where he should have gone in the first place rather than settle at Shechem. After another encounter with God at Bethel where his name change is reiterated – from Jacob to Israel – he and his family continue on south toward Mamre which is near Hebron. This is where Jacob had lived many years before so it is a homecoming for him. and where his father Isaac is still living. Yes, Isaac is still alive! He's quite old at this time. Jacob's mother, Rebekah died several years before. On the way as they are heading south, Rachel goes into labor and dies giving birth to Jacob's 12th son Benjamin. Ironically Rachel, who had cried in desperation to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die" (Genesis 30:1), dies giving birth to the child that Jacob gave her. So Jacob is grieving having lost his precious Rachel.

READ Genesis 35:19-21

Here we see this back and forth between the names Jacob and Israel. Whenever you hear Jacob called "Jacob," he is probably operating in the flesh for himself. Whenever you hear him called "Israel," he is operating on God's behalf for his family. Here it says "Israel journeyed" because he is taking his family to where God wants them to be.

Now we come to the one verse that contains the second story about the sins of Jacob's sons.

Story #2 Genesis 35 – Reuben's Sin with Bilhah

Who is Bilhah? She is the servant girl of Rachel who had just died.

READ Genesis 35:22

This one verse summarizes Reuben's sin. Why does Reuben commit this immoral act? Bilhah is Jacob's concubine who has wife status to some degree. She belongs to Jacob. Reuben is committing adultery. Why did Reuben do this? Are his actions here just pure lust? Perhaps Reuben wanted to prevent Rachel's maid, Bilhah, from succeeding Rachel as his father's favorite wife. Maybe Reuben resented the fact that Jacob did not honor his mother, Leah. Whatever his reasoning, Reuben's actions here constitute a claim against, a challenge to his father. His actions are basically a rebellion, a slap in the face to Jacob and his authority.

Even though there is no record that Jacob punishes Reuben at the time for what he did, the fact is that Jacob never forgives Reuben. Reuben's selfish actions result in him losing his birthright as the firstborn of Jacob's sons. As we will learn later Judah and his descendants will obtain the right to rule as head of the Israelite people.

Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael was not the covenant heir. In God's providence Isaac was. Isaac's firstborn son Esau was not the covenant heir. In God's providence Jacob was. And Jacob's firstborn son Reuben was not the covenant heir. In God's providence Judah was. Well, there is a brief summary of Jacob's family and then we come to v 27.

READ Genesis 35:27-29

Jacob finally returns home. One commentary I read said that Isaac lived for 12 years after Jacob's relocation to Hebron. Jacob remains in this area after Isaac's death. For Jacob his life since returning to the Promised Land consists of one tragic event after another.

Story #3 Genesis 38 – Judah's Sin with Tamar

This chapter begins with Judah leaving home. He compromises. Verse 1 says, "He turned aside." Judah marries a woman from among the accursed Canaanites. This woman is identified simply as the daughter of Shua. Judah ends up having three sons by her. The oldest son is named Er. When Er grows up, Judah selects a wife for him, a woman who is also among the Canaanites. Her name is Tamar.

READ Genesis 38:7-10

God kills Judah's first two sons because of their wickedness. So, now you have a third son, Shelah.

READ Genesis 38:11

Judah tells Tamar to remain in her father's household until his third son Shelah is old enough. Then she will become his wife and bear children by him. That's the plan.

READ Genesis 38:12-14

Tamar sees that Judah has not kept his word about giving her to his third son Shelah. It may be that Judah wrongly blames Tamar for the deaths of his first two sons rather than blaming his sons. But Tamar has every right to children by virtue of her lawful marriages to Judah's sons. She's been a widow now for several years and she's childless through no fault of her own. She's not getting any younger. She wants very badly to have children. At a point of desperation Tamar seizes upon an opportunity when it presents itself. She disguises herself as a prostitute and sits along the roadside where she knows Judah will pass by.

READ Genesis 38:15-18

Tamar's devious plan works. Judah ends up having sexual relations with his own daughter-in-law without even knowing it. Amazing! One commentary I read explains Tamar's mindset this way: "The influence of Hittite law may be reflected in Tamar's action, for it held that, when no brother in-law existed to fulfill the levirate duty (marriage of a widow by a brother of her deceased husband), the father-in-law was responsible." This is how Tamar justifies her actions.

In the next several verses Judah attempts to locate that "cult prostitute" he had seen by the roadside and had not recognized as being Tamar. He wants to pay her what he agreed to pay her, which was, a young goat from his flock. He looks and he looks and asks around but he cannot find her anywhere. She's vanished!

READ Genesis 38:24

Judah discovers that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant. He knows that it is not by his son Shelah. So, Judah's initial reaction is to have her burned, killed, which is the penalty for adultery.

READ Genesis 38:25-26

Judah realizes that HE is the one who got Tamar pregnant. His response seems to be one of genuine repentance. He realized he was wrong for not keeping his promise. He says, "She is more righteous than I." He never again had sexual relations with Tamar.

Tamar ends up having twins. The firstborn is Perez and the other is Zerah. When you look at the line of the Messiah, of Jesus in the New Testament, specifically the genealogy of Matthew Chapter 1, there are three Gentile women mentioned. We all know about Ruth (the Moabitess) and Rahab (the Canaanite prostitute from Jericho). But don't forget about this other Canaanite woman Tamar. She's there too.

Can you believe those stories are in the Bible?

What is the point of all this? Where can we find application for us today? I found several...

- God works through and often in spite of the limited self-serving plans of human beings. The writer's purpose is not to approve these human plans and schemes but to show how God, in His sovereign grace, can still achieve His purpose through them.
- Zeal can be a good thing. But misguided zeal can bring reproach upon the name of God. This is what happened with Jacob's family at Shechem.
- Our actions today could have far-reaching consequences well into the future, even beyond our own lives. What we do matters!

- It is not our right or our place to retaliate against those we believe have wronged us. Trust God to carry out His discipline and correction on other people's wrongdoings in His time.
- God has placed moral boundaries around us for our own protection (and for our own sanity). Don't cross them. You will not like the consequences.

One final thought: In the broad scheme of what we have been looking at in Genesis, it is telling the story of God's covenant people the Jews. These are the early patriarchs and their stories. You have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We all know about them. And then you get to Jacob's sons and Joseph is the one we love. But Jacob's ten older sons that we hear about in Chapters 34, 35 and 38, you think to yourself, "These are God's covenant people? These are who God chose?" It reminds us that God doesn't choose us based on our own merit, because we are such wonderful people. It is because God in His sovereignty chooses whom He will. God does not choose perfect people at all! I find great comfort in that.