

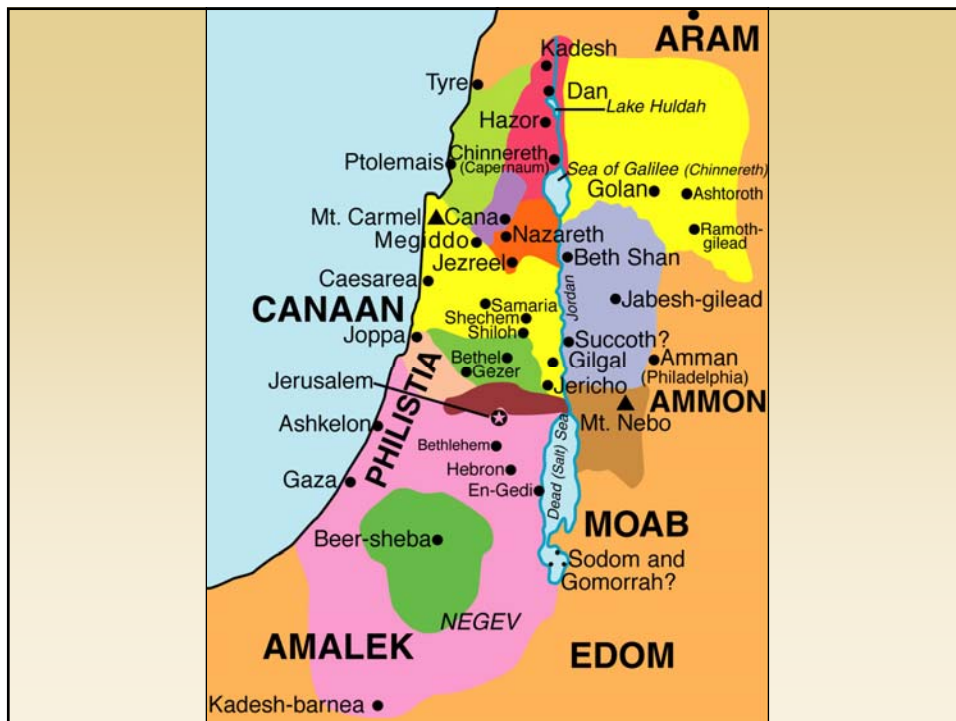


Genesis

Beginnings

Week 7
Chapters 32-38

A Wrestling Match, A Rape, and a Slave





A few reflections on where we've been

- ❖ Living the “with-God” life
 - God is present, Immanuel, with these people. He seeks intimacy, trust, and obedience. There is a conversational tone to all this – God speaks and we speak back.
- ❖ The people of God have become a family. We too are part of a family.
 - No family is immune to trouble – not this family, not our own. We are fallen people, doing what we shouldn't and failing to do what we should.
 - We shouldn't imagine that if we are only faithful enough then we will be kept from difficulties and suffering – but we will never be separated from God.
- ❖ God surprises!! Perhaps the biggest surprise so far is that God chooses to be present with *these* people. We need to stay open to God's surprising ways.
 - The honesty of these stories ought to aid our own self-understanding and our assurance that God is with us, even in all our own weaknesses.

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Jacob prepares to meet Esau (31:17 – 32:21)

- ❖ The return from exile begins. Laban chases down the fleeing family but is warned by God to leave them alone. After accusations back and forth, they finally separate in peace and Laban disappears from the story.
 - Rachel's theft is not discovered because she hides the “gods” in her saddle and won't dismount, claiming she is in her period.
- ❖ As Jacob gets close to home, he fears his meeting with Esau who is coming to meet him with 400 men – so he devises a shrewd plan. Jacob splits the family in two so at least one might survive.
 - On the one hand, he expects the worst – but on the other he remembers God's promises. All the children can't die can they? He is to have many descendents. This must have been a little like the tension Abraham felt when God told him to sacrifice Isaac.
- ❖ After a great prayer and a good night's sleep, Jacob plans to head off trouble by sending big-time gifts on ahead to his older brother.

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Jacob wrestles with God (32:22-32)

- ❖ Goodness . . . what a perplexing story!!
- ❖ God commits to a genuine encounter with Jacob.
 - God stoops to humanness and is unable to overcome Jacob. They wrestle all night. God finally injures Jacob but is still not able to break free. In the end, Jacob gets his *Magnificent Defeat*, as Buechner calls it. He has penetrated the mystery of God as even Abraham and Isaac had not. We don't really understand, but, still, we see it.
- ❖ Jacob gets his blessing and a name, but at a cost. A painful injury that will be with him the rest of his life. Is this a theology about the cost of discipleship? How would this story shape Israel's view of itself? What is the cost of being God's chosen people?
- ❖ In the darkness, as they wrestle, Jacob is able to see God's face and live! He seeks to close the distance completely and asks for God's name. God does not reveal his name, but nonetheless blesses Jacob.
 - Later, God will reveal his name to Moses but Moses cannot see God's face and live!

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Jacob meets Esau (33:1-17)

- ❖ What a shock! What a surprise! What a glorious meeting!
- ❖ Jacob looks up from his just-ended encounter with God and sees Esau.
 - All this is God's initiative. Jacob's prayers are being answered but in a way beyond his imagining. He has prayed for deliverance from his brother's army but will get joyful reconciliation.
 - Jacob's encounter with God seems to have made him less fearful. Now he will walk (with a limp) toward Esau at the head of the group.
- ❖ See how much this is like Jesus' story of the prodigal son. Esau *runs* to meet him !! This reconciliation is to Jacob like seeing God's face.
 - Notice though that they still have trouble reaching agreement on anything.
 - Also . . . Jacob refuses Esau's offer to have some of his own family/people stay with Jacob. The families cannot merge. The covenant is Jacob's (Israel), not Esau's (Edom).

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The rape of Dinah (33:18-34:31)

- ❖ This is a story of fallenness. We have (1) the many-faceted love that Shechem has for Dinah and (2) the violence perpetrated against her by Shechem and her own brothers.
 - In the language of Genesis, Dinah is not only raped but ritually defiled.
- ❖ Shechem rapes Dinah but then does everything in his power to make it right.
- ❖ The brothers betray the covenant by using circumcision as a ploy in deception and murder.
 - Note the over-the-top vengeance. “An eye for any eye” will be progress.
- ❖ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have all been very cautious in protecting their relationship with Canaanite peoples. Here, the sons blow it all up, setting the stage for the violence.
 - Jacob pronounces judgment on the violence perpetrated by his sons (see Genesis 49:5-7).
- ❖ Finally, note that there is no explicit God language in this chapter. However, the references to defilement and circumcision imply that theology is close by.

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The journeys of Jacob & the future of Esau (Chapters 35-36)

- ❖ Chapter 35 is a bit like Jacob’s family scrapbook, bits and pieces loosely linked together.
 - Note the attention paid to the death of Rebekah’s maid. The Bible is the story of God’s work in this world. Yet, kings and empires play little part. Instead, the focus is on the “little people.”
 - Here we get the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. Isaac has lived long enough (180 years) to see Jacob come home.
 - Note the renunciation of foreign gods and the changing of clothes. This is all a symbol of moving from the old to the new.
- ❖ Chapter 36’s inclusion reminds us that God works outside the community of the covenant. Esau may not be “chosen” but he is still blessed.
 - “Chosen” and “not chosen” is a dividing line down the middle of this family, separating brother from brother.

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Joseph and his brothers (Chapter 37)

- ❖ This begins the story of Joseph AND the story of Israel's emergence as the people of God. It prepares us for the story of the Exodus (Egypt, slaves/servants).
- ❖ Though God's action and relationships are central to the story, God never appears to Joseph as he did to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is never obvious here. He works quietly behind the scenes.
- ❖ Joseph is his father's favorite and seems naïve in telling his family of his dreams. When his brothers scheme to kill him, Reuben refuses to participate. The brothers decide to sell Joseph into slavery and trick their father into believing that his beloved son had been attacked by a wild animal.
 - In their world, dreams were understood to be from the outside, but the brothers chalk it up to Joseph's arrogance.
 - Everyone is in the mix here. Even Joseph adds fuel to the fire. Reuben could have told Jacob the truth.
 - There is no mention of God anywhere here.

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Tamar and Judah (Chapter 38)

- ❖ This story is troubling on all sorts of levels.
- ❖ No explanation is given for why God put the two sons to death nor how. There are certainly other wicked people.
- ❖ Onan doesn't want an heir for his dead brother because he wants a double share. So he uses Tamar only for sex, but won't allow her to get pregnant.
- ❖ When Judah does not fulfill his promise to Tamar to make her the wife of his third son, she takes the only route open to her. She devises a plan to get pregnant by Judah.
 - Note that Judah knows she has acted more rightly than he has.
 - Also – Judah assumes Tamar is a prostitute when she takes off her widow's clothes and sits by the road. She never claims it as her own identity.
- ❖ David will be a descendent of the first-born to Tamar, Perez.

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Where is Jesus in this?

- ❖ Matthew's and Luke's genealogies of Jesus puts him squarely within Jacob's family. Look them up and you'll find both Judah and Perez.
 - Perhaps the deaths of Judah's sons are meant to clean wickedness from the line that would lead to David and to Jesus.
- ❖ The scene of Jacob's grief and refusal of comfort will serve as a metaphor for Israel's later grief at the death of Israel. Isaiah spoke of a comforter to come (Isaiah 40:1). This weeping could be relieved by the coming of God's Messiah (John 16:20).