

Gleanings from Genesis 34-36

An Outline

- I. Dinah and the Shechemites (34:1-31)
 - A. Shechem rapes Dinah (34:1-4).
 - B. Jacob's sons are furious (34:1-7).
 - C. Hamor and his sons Shechem propose marriage and unity (34:8-12).
 - D. Jacob's sons agree deceptively (34:13-17).
 - E. Hamor and Shechem convince the city to embrace the proposal (34:18-24).
 - F. Simeon and Levi murder, plunder and enslave Shechem and the entire city (34:24-29).
 - G. Jacob lightly rebukes his sons (34:30-31).
- II. Jacob Returns to Bethel (35:1-15)
 - A. God tells Jacob to go to Bethel (35:1).
 - B. Jacob fulfills his vow by ridding of idols and building an altar in Bethel to the LORD (35:1-7).
 - C. Death and memorial of Rebekah's nurse (35:8).
 - D. God appears to Jacob in Bethel and reaffirms His covenant (35:9-15).
- III. The Deaths of Rachel and Isaac (35:16-29)
 - A. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin (35:16-20).
 - B. Reuben sleeps with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (35:21-22).
 - C. Jacob's Twelve Sons born in Paddan Aram (35:23-26).
 - D. Jacob and Esau bury their father Isaac, 180 yrs old (35:27-29).
- IV. Esau's Descendants (36:1-43)
 - A. Account of Esau and his sons from Canaanite wives (36:1-8)
 - B. List of Esau's sons from Canaanite wives living in Seir (36:9-30).
 - C. Rulers of Edom preceding kings in Israel (36:31-43).

Questions for Study

1. **Atrocities by God's people did not thwart God's purposes:** Dinah's rape was terrible, but did it warrant the response that Jacob's sons inflicted on the people of Shechem? (Genesis 34:25-29) What is more, Jacob's response was something less than noble. His gentle rebuke of his sons was not for the mass murder, plunder and enslavement of the people of Shechem but for the possible reprisal by the neighboring Canaanites (Genesis 34:30). Later on his deathbed, perhaps upon further reflection, Jacob curses Simeon and Levi for their wrongdoing (Genesis 49:5-7). As we condemn those who kill in the "Name of God" today – like ISIS – let us remember that there is Old Testament precedent. Some have tried to justify Simeon and Levi as simply carrying out the righteous wrath of God against the Canaanites, but there was no command from God at this point. It would be more accurate to say that God brought good out of the evil committed by the brothers, just as God would do through Joseph in spite of his brothers' treachery. Isn't this what God did when Jacob and his mother deceived Isaac? (Genesis 27). Does God require evil to bring about His good purpose? Isn't it more accurate to say that God brings about His good purposes in spite of the evil? That was Joseph's assessment in Genesis 50:20. Praise God

for His sovereign grace, which brings about His good will in spite of our sinful and destructive ways!

2. **Jacob's Journey of Faith Come Full Circle** – When Jacob was last at Bethel, it was while running away from the murderous intentions of his brother Esau, from whom Jacob had stolen the birthright by colluding with his mother Rebekah to deceive their father Isaac. God met him there to reaffirm His covenant promise to Abraham. In fact, Jacob named the place “Bethel,” literally “house of God,” to commemorate this experience. He also promised God three things if God would allow him to return safely: (1) to make the LORD his God, (2) to set up the pillar in Bethel as God's house, and (3) to give a tenth (“tithe”) of everything God gave him (Genesis 28:20-22).

Jacob keeps at least the first two of his commitments when he arrives at Bethel in Genesis 35. He tells the people to get rid of their foreign gods (Genesis 35:2). Remember. Jacob and his family did not exclusively worship the LORD (Yahweh) before this time (e.g. Rachel takes Laban's household gods - Genesis 31:19, 34). They likely worshipped a plurality of gods along with the LORD. It appears that Jacob gives the LORD His exclusive worship at this time. It is also at this time that God adds to Jacob the name “Israel,” which means “one who contends with God” or, as one commentator suggests, “God's fighter” (Genesis 35:10). These names would be used interchangeably throughout the Scriptures, just as the names Simon, Cephas and Peter are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Thus, as we saw with Abraham and Isaac, rather than instant faith and commitment to the LORD, Jacob's faith developed over time.

3. **Rebekah and Rachel – A somewhat dishonorable witness?** There may be nothing remarkable about the mention of Deborah's death and her memorial in Genesis 35:8. She was Rebekah's (Jacob's mom) nurse. However, there is no such honorable mention of Rebekah. Why? Isn't the patriarch's wife greater than her maid? Could this dishonor have something to do with Rebekah's treachery?

Then, in Genesis 35:19 we are told that Rachel was not buried in the tomb of the Patriarchs but on the road en route to Bethlehem. Her sister Leah would be buried in the tomb of the Patriarchs, but not Rachel. Some have suggested that since they had no means of preserving her body over the days or weeks it would take them to arrive at the tomb, they simply buried her here en route. But they could have brought her bones back later, as they did for Joseph in the Exodus. Why? The mention of Rachel's stealing Laban's household gods demonstrates that she was not fully committed to the LORD. She died prematurely giving birth to Benjamin, inadvertently prophesied by Jacob (Genesis 31:32).

Although the Old Testament does not give moral judgments on things like the massacre at Shechem, Rebekah's deception of Isaac, and Rachel's worship of idols, there are some subtle clues to help us discern that these were not blessed by God but that God brought about His purposes in spite of the evil done.

4. **Incest by the First Born** - Reuben was Jacob's firstborn son and positioned to receive the birthright above all his brothers. Yet, we are told that he slept with his father's concubine Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. In the NT, this kind of immorality, a man sleeping with his father's wife, was not even tolerated by pagan Gentiles (1 Corinthians 5:1), yet here we have the leader of a chief tribe of Israel committing this very act. No motive or circumstances are given, only the act, as if it was just one of a series of events that carry the narrative forward. But Israel heard what Reuben did. Then, we do not hear about this incident until Jacob's deathbed, where Jacob cites the incident as the reason for cursing rather than blessing Reuben (Genesis 49:3-4). Reuben's birthright would be given to Joseph via his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who would be added to the inheritance of the sons of Israel (1 Chronicles 5:1-2).

The history of the patriarchs is not clean, moral or good. Only God and His ways are good. I believe we are meant to see this contrast, not only with the Patriarchs but also throughout biblical history. Everything drives us to the necessity of God's grace through the perfect life and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. **A walk through the cemetery and the meaning of life.** Genesis 36 may seem at first insignificant because it is a genealogy, what's more a genealogy of a non-chosen brother, Esau. Both men and women are on the list. The women have names suggesting they were beautiful fashionistas (e.g. Basemath means "perfumed one" later becoming Adah or "adorned one," and Mahalath means "musical one" later changed to Basemath, and Judith means "praised one" later changed to Oholibamah or "tall, stately"). Many of Esau's sons become chiefs and kings (Genesis 36:15, 29, 31, 40). Esau was prolific with no suggestion of barrenness, as experienced by Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. It appears he was also quite rich, even telling Jacob to keep his gifts because he already has plenty (Genesis 33:9). He traveled with a military entourage of 400 men (Genesis 33:1), and that was just to meet and welcome his brother. By all measures, Esau was a very successful man. I don't think it was any accident that Moses mentions that there were "kings who reigned in Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel" (Genesis 36:31). Although Israel was promised a kingdom and kings too, this would be centuries in the future. Edom was developing much more rapidly than Israel.

When I read this account, I have the same feeling that I had when reading the account of the lineage of Cain in Genesis 4. Even though he was banished by God to be a wanderer after he murdered his brother Abel, Cain goes on to build the first city, which he named after his son Enoch (Genesis 4:17). What is more, his descendants have notable accomplishments. Jabal became famous for mobile living and herding. Jubal likely invented and popularized stringed instruments and pipes. Tubal-Cain invented all manner of tools from bronze and iron. Compared to Cain's lineage, the lineage of Seth, the one who took the place of Abel, who Cain murdered, seems quite backward and rustic. Cain may be the father of all things modern and cosmopolitan.

Oftentimes, the things we value today are not what God values. Our very selfish, materialistic and worldly priorities are more in line with the way of Cain and Esau than the way of the chosen people of God.

I like the insight that Steven J. Cole provides on this chapter from a site I follow, <https://bible.org>. Here is the direct link to his teaching from this chapter: <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-63-successful-man-who-failed-god-genesis-361-43>

(1) This chapter is in the Bible for at least two reasons. First, Moses was writing to people who were about to conquer the land of Canaan. The Edomites, Esau's descendants, lived on the borders of that land. When Israel had sought to pass over their land en route to Canaan, the Edomite king refused, even though Moses promised to pay for any food or water they consumed (Num. 20:14-21). Perhaps once Israel was established in the land, someone would say, "Let's teach those Edomites a lesson!" But God commanded Israel not to provoke Edom and said that He would not give Israel any of their land (Deut. 2:2-5). **So Israel needed to know who these people were so that they would treat them as the Lord had commanded.**

(2) A second reason for this chapter is to make Israel and us consider the outcome of Esau's profane life, especially as contrasted with Jacob's life. There is an obvious contrast between chapter 36, which outlines the wealth, success and power of Esau and his descendants and 37:1, which says with understatement, "Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan." While Esau was out conquering the land of Edom, founding a nation, fathering kings, and making a great worldly success of himself, Jacob was quietly living in a land he didn't even own, the land where his fathers had sojourned. While Esau's descendants were mighty chieftains, famous in their day, Jacob's descendants were down in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh.

So the chapter in its context portrays two roads set before us all: The road to earthly success, fame, and power, which can bring quick, visible results; and, the road of obedience to the will of God, which is much slower and less visible in terms of the payoff. The worldly road focuses on

the things which are seen, which, from God's perspective, are destined to perish; God's road focuses on the things which are not seen, but which are eternal and cannot be taken from us (see 2 Cor. 4:18). So the chapter teaches: **If we succeed by worldly standards, but fail with God, we fail where it really matters.**

He draws some very relevant applications from the passage:

1. **A beautiful family by the world's standards does not equal a family blessed by God.**

Esau turned away from God when he took wives from the daughters of Canaan (Genesis 36:2; cf. 24:3; 26:34). Still lacking discernment, he took a wife from the descendants of Ishmael (28:9). There is no mention of barren wives for Esau, though Rachel was barren for a long time, as were Rebekah and Sarah before her. Esau represents the natural man- strong, capable, independent, able to cope with life's problems with his own resources. Who needs to depend on God for things when you can take care of it yourself? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their barren wives, represent God's way of working. He humbles our pride by shutting us up with problems we are incapable of solving – problems like barren wives in the face of promises – to make us into a great nation.

Esau had a beautiful family by the world's standards. He was the father of a dynasty. To be one of Esau's descendants in that culture was like being a Ford, Rockefeller or Kennedy in our day. Esau's sons and grandsons became chiefs and kings. Esau's wives were no doubt beautiful women, as their names suggest. While it is difficult to know the precise meaning of the names in Genesis 36, it is notable that most if not all of the 81 names are not spiritual (as in the names of the descendants of Israel) but reflect the natural surroundings. The point is, Esau's family was outwardly attractive. His wives were beautiful women who bore him children. His kids were born leaders, talented and strong. Esau was a likable, popular man. He was a skilled outdoorsman, a man who loved the taste of game, a man caught up with the enjoyment of the good life. But there was one big problem: God was not a part of this family. Esau, the grandson of the godly Abraham, the favorite son of peaceful Isaac, was a thoroughly secular man who lived for the pleasure of the here and now. He was a successful man whose sons and grandsons after him were successful men, by worldly standards. **But they all failed at what matters most because they left God out of their lives.**

The most important thing you can impart to your kids is not how to be a worldly success. It's easy to encourage our kids to succeed in the wrong ways. They may make the football team or be the homecoming queen. They may score well on the SAT and go to the best colleges and get the best paying jobs. **But if they fail with God, all that stuff doesn't matter at all. We need to instill in our kids what it means to succeed with God.**

2. **Material prosperity does not equal spiritual prosperity.**

Esau moved east because he was too prosperous to stay near Jacob (Genesis 36:6-8). This took place before Jacob returned. Esau realized that the inheritance was going to Jacob, so he looked for a new place to live. It was nice of Esau to be so agreeable. But, sadly, he had no vision for God's promises to Abraham concerning Canaan. Ever since God called Abraham, He repeatedly emphasized Canaan as the land He would give to Abraham's descendants. But for Esau, any nice land would do. He had no spiritual vision. He was living for himself, not for God's purpose. He was materially rich, but spiritually poor.

To his credit, Esau was not greedy. When he saw Jacob after their twenty years apart, he declined Jacob's gift by saying, "I have plenty, my brother. Keep your things" (33:9). But it's

possible to be generous, contented people, but still be living for material things, not for God. **The danger is that our material prosperity dulls our senses with regard to our desperate need for God.** The Lord warned the church in Laodicea, "... you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). **We American Christians, who have been so blessed materially, need to be careful to become rich toward God by laying up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21; cf. Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-34).**

3. Political power does not equal power with God.

Esau and his descendants were men of great political power. They are called chiefs (Genesis 36:15 ff.; 40 ff.) and kings (36:31 ff.). It is pointedly stated that these men reigned as kings in Edom before any king reigned in Israel (36:31). Critics leap upon this verse as proof that Genesis must have been written after the beginning of the monarchy, some 300 years after Moses. But in the previous chapter God had prophesied to Jacob that kings would come forth from him (35:11), a promise which had also been made to Abraham (17:6, 16).

Clearly, the point of 36:31 is to show that Esau's sons, who walked away from God, had the distinction of being kings long before Jacob's sons to whom it was promised. Jacob's sons were a nation of slaves at the same time that Esau's sons were kings. Esau's sons could have looked at Jacob's sons and scoffed, "Where is your God and His promises?"

Isn't that how it often seems--that the world is winning, while God's people are losing? **We'll reign with Christ someday, but meanwhile the church is often persecuted and disregarded by powerful political leaders who laugh at God. But we need to remember that political power and power with God are two different things.** The world may boast now in its political power, but He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them (Psalm 2:4). It is the Lord who "removes kings and establishes kings" (Daniel 2:21). While it is fine for Christian people to be involved in politics, we need to keep things in perspective. Political power is always subject to Him who is "ruler over the realm of mankind," who "bestows it on whom He wishes" (Daniel 4:17). **True power is having power with God.**

Esau's kingdom, Edom, later caused great trouble to Israel. There were frequent wars between the two nations. Edom cheered those who attacked God's people (Ps. 137:7; the entire book of Obadiah). Amalek, Esau's grandson (36:12), became the founder of a people who were a perennial enemy of Israel (Exodus 17:8-16). There is a repeated emphasis in Genesis 36, that Esau is Edom (36:1, 8, 9, 19, and 43; also, the name Edom and its synonym, Seir, are used frequently). The significance of this otherwise unnecessary repetition seems to be that God wanted His people to see what results when a man lives apart from Him. From this one man, Esau, an outwardly good man, a likable man, a successful man from the world's perspective, came the godless nation Edom, which often plagued the people of God. So God says, "Remember: Esau is Edom!" **Whatever Edom's temporal success, they would be remembered throughout eternity for their spiritual failure. This is the fate of any nation no matter how outwardly successful, whose God is not the LORD.**

4. Temporal fame does not equal eternal recognition by God.

In their day, Esau was more famous than Jacob. At the end of their lives, Jacob had about 70 descendants living under Pharaoh's umbrella. Esau had conquered Edom and established a dynasty there. By Moses's day (over 400 years later), Israel was a fledgling nation of slaves, recently escaped from Egypt, owning no land of their own. Edom was an established kingdom which had the power to refuse Israel passage over their land.

But this tour through the graveyard of Genesis 36 shows us that God, not man, writes the final chapter of history. These once-famous names don't mean a thing to our world today, but Israel's name is in the news almost daily. These men, successful by the world's measure, passed off the scene and were soon forgotten as others clamored to take their place. Today we don't know anything more about them than is written here. **Fame is a fleeting thing.**

The Edomite race endured until the time of Christ, when they were known as Idumeans. They disappeared from history in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed. But before that, some famous Idumeans, descendants of Esau, ruled over Israel: Herod the Great and his successor, Herod Antipas. They were wealthy, power-hungry, cruel despots. Herod the Great slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem in his attempt to kill the newborn King of the Jews (Matthew 2:16-18). Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14:9-12) and mocked Jesus just prior to the crucifixion (Luke 23:6-12).

In a way it was a replay of history, when Esau's descendant, Herod, who at that time had far more worldly prosperity, power, and fame, and Jacob's descendant, Jesus, faced each other. God's side didn't seem to be winning. Jacob's descendant went to the cross, while Esau's descendant relaxed in his luxurious palace. But God would write the final chapter on that part of history as well. The great Herod, like his ancestor Esau, was a successful man who went to hell. Jesus Christ, the descendant of Jacob, was raised from the dead and is coming again to reign in power and glory.

What really matters is recognition by God, not by this world. We live in a culture that worships fame. But the recognition that counts will come soon, when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." The most awful thing would be to be famous on this earth--even famous as a Christian--and to stand before the Lord and say, "Lord, Lord, I've done all these things in Your name," but to hear Him say, "Depart from Me; I never knew you."

A Great Illustration

On the Shetland Islands off the northern coast of Scotland, a man spent five years and a lifetime of savings building a 62-foot steel yacht that weighed 126 tons. On the day of its launching, he invited a local band to play and the whole town turned out to help him celebrate. He planned a voyage around the world as soon as the boat was launched. The band played, the bottle of champagne was smashed across the bow, and the ship was lowered into the water. But it sank to the bottom of the harbor! What good is a beautiful boat that doesn't float? That man wasted five years and a lot of money building a useless thing--a boat that didn't float. **What good is a successful life that ends, whether in 25 or 85 years, if the person is not ready for eternity? "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).**

Our tour through Esau's cemetery is over. I hope it's made you think about the question, "What am I living for?" While we still live, we all have a choice: To join Jacob and his descendants in waiting patiently for God to fulfill His covenant promises to us, as we labor for His coming kingdom. Or, to look over at Esau, prospering in the world, and join him in the pursuit of secular success. **If we succeed by worldly standards, but fail with God, we have failed where it really matters. Whether we fail or succeed by worldly standards, if we succeed with God, we will have true and lasting success.**

Discussion Questions

1. In a culture, where there is such strong pressure for us and our kids to succeed academically, athletically and financially, how do we make sure that their spiritual success is the priority? (relevant verses: Matthew 6:33; Ephesians 6:4; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
2. Most people have a natural desire for financial success. Can this desire be reconciled with our God-commanded pursuit of spiritual success? (Matthew 6:25-34; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; Matthew 6:19-24 with Luke 12:22-34; Luke 12:12-21; Luke 16:1-14; Hebrews 13:5; Acts 2:45; Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:17; James 2:5; Hebrews 10:34)
3. As Christians we may not be so concerned for great wealth or fame, but we want to be “stable and happy” and we want our children to be “stable and happy.” Yet, we are confronted with some very challenging commands from Scripture, like “deny yourselves” (Luke 9:23), “give up everything (Luke 14:33), “hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life” (Luke 14:26). All of these are conditions for being a disciples of Christ, which is not only what we are called to be but also called to make (Matthew 28:19-20). How are we to understand such a radical demand for loyalty from Jesus?