
Life's Difficult Tensions

Genesis 35:1-37:1

Introduction Sometimes, life is difficult to understand. We are faced with baffling perplexities of natural disasters, depraved crimes, or unreasonable people. The responses of people to the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Hurricane Katrina have reflected the general perplexity and anger that comes when life is difficult, dangerous, and destructive. People's explanations and interpretations leave them struggling.

Sometimes, the Christian's life is even more difficult. What we are sometimes taught from the Bible shapes present expectations that clash terribly with present realities. God promises to provide all your needs including the grace to give but you can't even pay your bills. God promises long life and health to people who honor parents but your godly sister dies early. God promises to heal His people, but you have a debilitating disease. God is merciful and loving, yet life is hard and horrible.

These are very difficult tensions. We have them – the question is, how do we deal with them?

So what's up here in Genesis? How are these two chapters going to help us?

Moses is ending the *generations of Isaac* section which is primarily about Jacob and Esau. While Jacob will appear again at the end of the Genesis, here is where his story primarily ends. From here on out, instead of being a main character, he is moved to a supporting role (and not an admirable at that.) But as life winds down for these two brothers, their experience of life at that point is instructive for all. Moses is recording this history with a *for God's people* intent.

For Israel they saw Jacob with all the blessings of God still not receiving the fullness of God's promises. They also saw the greatness of Esau and the rise of Edom as a nation with the questions and tensions that created.

For us there are all the practical tensions we live with. Some are matters of sin. Some are matters of the suffering of living in a fallen world. Some are perplexities where there are tensions between what God has promised and our experiences of His present providences.

How does a text like this help us deal with life's difficult tensions? Let's give it our attention and see what God will do.

The Mingled Experience of the Righteous**Genesis 35**

Jacob experiences obedience and the blessing of God mingled with sorrow and failure.

The Sweetness of Obedience and Blessing (35:1-15)

The weak indecisive leader of Genesis 34 stirs himself up to obey God when God speaks. The danger his sons have placed him in dislodges him from where he has settled. Now, he is to return to the place where he met with God before, the place called Bethel, the house of God.

The Blessing of Purity**(v.1-4)**

Jacob's first act of decisive obedience is to command a single minded worship of God. He ordered the gathering up of all the idols collected and carried while in his journeying. Surely this is pointedly aimed at Rachel, the darling of his heart. But there seems to have been much idolatry that had infected his household.

In the rituals of changing their clothes, purifying (washing) themselves and taking away their earrings, he is showing a reverence for God and repentance towards God. Here is a distinct putting off of the old and a putting on of the new. There is nothing essentially evil in any of these things: their clothes, their cleanliness, their earrings. But putting them away is an object lesson, a visible act demonstrating that the burial of the idols affects all of life.

Shechem - make no mistake, the name of the evil person of Genesis 34 has now become the name of a place where evil idols will be buried. Is it possible that more is intimated here? Aren't idols normally smashed and burned? Isn't it curious that here that the idolatry and its attendant immorality is placed in a grave under the tree? Maybe as a very dim shadow, but I see a cross and a tomb.

The Blessing of Protection**(v.5-8)**

Jacob's continuing act of obedience is surrounded by the protecting hand of God. He was fearful of imminent destruction in Genesis 34:30. But as he moves out towards Luz (Bethel) God caused the people who would have pursued and destroyed to be afraid. So he arrived safely at the place where he had met God before, where God had revealed Himself before. There is so clear a sense of returning, of arriving, of a satisfying being where he is supposed to be. Kneeling in the Presence of our God is the safest and best place to be.

But even here, there can be sadness. Even here, we can lose people we love. Even when God is shielding us from enemies, death can still reach out a cold hand and scythe down Rebekah's nurse, Deborah. This is the only time in Scripture she is mentioned. But it obviously brought pain and maybe perplexity. Even in Bethel, there is Allon-bacuth; in this world, even in the house of God there are oaks of weeping.

The Blessing of Prominence (v.9-15)

Jacob's walk with God was grounded in the promises that God had given and the changes God had caused. This paragraph is a rehearsal, a review, a reminder of what God had already done. The verbs here are historical – they are saying what God has done. When we remember God's person, promises and performance God is showing Himself to us. In this section, God's speaking here was pointing back to His own character, His granting of a new name and the grand promises He has made.

In this rehearsal of what God has promised, we see a magnificent vista of prominence and prosperity. Twelve sons are the result of being fruitful and multiplying. Here the Adamic and Noahic commands are echoed. Since we have Galatians now, we know that the nation will be physical descendents and a company of nations will be gathered as spiritual descendents. Yes, kings will come from his body, the great king David and last King, Jesus will as well. He will inherit and inhabit the land – the bordered land of earthly Canaan and eventually, the great company of spiritual descendents the unbounded land of heaven and all that will be new in the new creation.

So, this text points us first to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Bethel. He is the indwelling of God, God with us. He is the essence of holy purity. He is our protection and the object of our worship. He is the fulfillment of a people, a king and a land. And we are in Him as the dwelling place, the Bethel of God by the Spirit. So we are to put away our idols, to live in purity. It is gathered as the corporate Bethel, the church, that we are safe and worshippers. And it is in Him and He in us that the new creation is begun, but not yet completely fulfilled.

There is the heart of the tension.

The Sorrows of Disobedience and Death (35:16-29)

In the midst of the journey, there can be such suffering and sorrows. Here is disobedience and death mingled with such sweetness in walking with God.

The Mingling of Birth and Death (v.16-21)

Isn't this vivid? The sweet pleasure of a son's birth and the sorrowing pain of a wife's death joined together. This was truly hard labor. The struggle is evidenced in the names given this last of Jacob's sons. Rachel called him the "Son of my sorrow". Jacob called him the "Son of my right hand." O how Jacob's heart was entwined with Rachel and her sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Here, this man walking with God, having God's protection and promises, holds a dying wife and a newborn son. And, for the first time, the *Jacob* who buries his beloved has become the *Israel* traveling on (v.20-21).

The Mingling of Sins and Sons (v.22-26)

Doesn't this ring true? Here was a perverted son who caused shame and here is a parade of sons who invoked pride. Moses places these side-by-side on purpose. Reuben committed incest. He slept with Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. He may have been wickedly attempting to subvert his father's place and as-

sert tribal leadership. He may be attempting to pollute Rachel's side of the family. Israel (Jacob) hears of it. Reuben will hear of it later.

And then the sons listed by their mother. Here is a source of pride. Here were twelve stalwart sons. Yet among them were bloody and devious men. Among them were gentle and God-fearing souls. Even when we are walking with God, sons and daughters can bring such gladness and such grief.

The Mingling of Separation and Reconciliation (v.27-29)

Isn't this sometimes the best and bitterest of life? Jacob came home to his aged father. After many long years he arrived home once again. His mother was dead. His favorite wife was dead. Isaac will only know her by stories. We can image Jacob presenting his sons, touring his wealth, the long story of travel and travail, of bane and blessing. Ah, homecoming is great.

But Isaac was home going. He breathed his last and was gathered to his people. Standing there as they mourn and as they recall were two brothers, finally reconciled and side-by-side at a grave. This is groaning and grieving. This relief is and reconciliation. This is hands on each other's shoulders and big-bear hugs and soft thumps on the back while tears track sad paths down cheeks.

This should help us. Beginning and ending are mixed in a fallen world. Aching love and loss are mixed in a fallen world. Regret and relationships are mixed in a fallen world. Because we are traveling through, sojourning. Is this just the way it is? No, this is God's design that we will be constantly reminded that God is *here* even in the midst of trouble and that *here* is not home, even in the midst of blessing.

The Surprising Prosperity of the Wicked Genesis 36:1-37:1

As the grieving brothers part, Moses keeps Esau in the frame, in camera. Esau grew in wealth, tribal organization and national unity as Edom became a nation. Israel, never forget, Esau is Edom.

His Personal Success (36:1-8)

Esau's success was tied his becoming a Canaanite. His wives were from the land (v.2-3). His sons were born in the land (v.4-5). His riches were acquired in the land (v.6). His possessions became too great to share the land (v.6-7). He moved out of the land and occupied the hill country of Seir (v.8).

He was an enormously prosperous and successful man. But this identification of him with the Canaanites highlights the fact that he was still a wicked man. He had many sons from Canaanite wives; his wealth was acquired in Canaanite lands. He had rejected God, yet was reconciled to Jacob. He was, because of several later texts, rejected by God. He was not a believer. He was a wicked man. His descendents were wicked.

His Tribal Success

(36:9-41)

The flow here is sons to chiefs to kings. Esau's family, a rich tribe, became Edom, a ruling nation. This is the point of this genealogy. Genealogies may be inclusive or exclusive. Most genealogies in the Mosaic literature are designed to establish the line of David and the Messiah. But this one, like the one of Ishmael earlier, is intended to identify those who are certainly outside the covenant, those who do not inherit the land and have no place in the line of Christ.

His descendents will become a nation called Edom. Edom will become a profanity in the vocabulary of Israel's history. Moses wants Israel to be clear that Esau is Edom. That identification as a people is repeated in verses 1, 8, 19, 41. That identification with the region or nation is repeated in verses 9, 16, 17, 21, 31, 43.

The point here is that God's people, living with mingled grief and gladness, must never forget who the wicked really are. Esau may be prospering, growing and becoming the nation whose king and armies now straddle Israel's route to the Promised Land. But Jacob, Israel and all God's people know that there is more than just what is promised and received here.

The last verse of Genesis 36 shows Esau and his nation dwelling in the land of their possession. In contrast, Genesis 37:1, Jacob and his tribe are still sojourners in the land they have been promised.

Lessons

A fundamental truth and theme is evident here that we must learn: God's people live in an *already, but not yet* tension. Let's flesh that out a bit and then map it over life.

Jacob and Israel are promised the land and the kingdom and a King. They even at times have it all – living in Palestine, having David and Solomon rule over them in a large and powerful kingdom. But the fulfillment of those promises was still future.

God's people live in the tension between God's promises and God's providences. God promises to provide, protect, heal, sustain, rescue and so on. But we sometimes are needy, hurt, sick, faltering, and enduring what we would like to delivered from. This often causes Christians to be perplexed. It sometimes causes them to doubt God or His Word.

God's promises are to us now and often received by us much later. In one sense, all of God's promises are "Yes, and Amen" now. But in another sense, no promise is completely fulfilled until the new heavens and new earth come. So we live in this *already and not yet* tension. This is not just true of a small group of God's people, but it actually marks out who are the true people of God. Hebrews 11 says that those with commended faith may not receive what is promised, have hope and joy in suffering and God is not ashamed to be called the God of this kind of people.

So where are we in the midst of this?

What about our aims for walking with God that seems so attended by failure and sin?

What about our families where there is so much mingling of gladness and grief?

What about our trials, troubles and terrors from those who are bent on our harm?

What about destruction, disease and death when we are present possessors of eternal life?

What about conflict, strife, broken relationships and shattered marriages?

When I am trying to please God, why do I struggle with finances and my friends living wicked lives seem to have infinite resources?

Why does life have to hurt so much? Why is there this tension?

From all that we have observed in the life of Jacob as it has reached this climax, here are heart organizing and orienting couplets orbiting around the already and not yet.

Jesus pleased God while enduring suffering; and
Jesus' enduring suffering pleased God.

The presence of trouble does not mean the absence of God; and
the presence of God does not guarantee the absence of trouble

The promises of God are sure and will be fulfilled; and
the promises of God may not be fulfilled in our lifetimes.

God has designed our trouble to expose our hearts and change our lives; and
God has determined the exact right dose of trouble to meet His design.

The mingling of grief and gladness uproots us from earthly comfort; and
the mingling of grief and gladness uplifts us to our heavenly Comforter.

The fulfillment of all we long for has already been secured by Jesus; and
the fulfillment of all we long for is a not yet, future experience.

This is what it means to be a Christian. Listen to these words from Hebrews that illuminate our lives and point our hopes.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. [Hebrews 11:13-16]

So, yes here is the tension – trouble now, triumph later, and God's smile all the way.