

GROUNDS OF FAITH CAFÉ: “Genesis” (Subtitled: Is there a snake in your Garden too?) Further subtitled: Lessons from the Garden! Genesis Lesson 28 (38:1 – 39:23): Some Summary Thoughts:

Chapter 38: The chapter opens with an interesting vignette depicting a sexual escapade between Judah and Tamar (his daughter-in-law). The episode follows Judah’s “rescue” of his brother Joseph by deciding not to kill him, but sell him into slavery (37:26). The story continues as Er, Judah’s eldest son marries Tamar. Er is depicted as “*wicked in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD put him to death*” (v. 7). Tamar is then passed to Onan, the second son, to fulfill the first son’s obligations, but Onan “*did what was wicked in the LORD’s sight*” (v.10) by not fulfilling his obligation, so the LORD put Onan to death. To spare his third son, Judah delays in providing Tamar to his third son, which sets the stage for Tamar’s creative act to entice Judah into his obligation. When all comes to fruition, Judah is forced to conclude “*she is more right (righteous) than I*” (v. 26). Twins are birthed (reminding us of the birth of Judah’s father, Jacob/Israel. Perez (“breach”) becomes the firstborn; Zerah (“brightness” – perhaps for the crimson thread?) is second. Much later we will see that Perez figures mightily in the lineage of our Lord, as King David will come from his line.

Chapter 39: This chapter provides a follow-up story of sexual encounter. The setting, helps us with some observations. The picture drawn of Joseph differs considerably from his “spoiled brat” image from before. Interestingly, with his change in social status (for the worst) comes a concomitant change in his character (for the better)! Before, Joseph’s attitude and actions generated negativity in the family structure. In Potiphar’s house, the opposite is true. The LORD blesses Joseph (v. 2) and, as a consequence, he brings blessing to all around him (v. 5). While enslaved, Joseph embodies the core of God’s enjoinder to his great-grandfather Abraham to bless as he has been blessed (12:1-3) and even seems to represent fruition of God’s other admonition to Abraham to “*...command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has promised him*” (Gen 18:19).

One observation becomes immediate: This is a different Joseph in Egypt from the one we have encountered earlier. He no longer seems content to elevate himself. Rather, he is concerned with the fortunes of others. Coats document his change in fortune: The original coat of great value, lost in the pit, is replaced by another patrician coat in Egypt (that of vizier). But this coat, like the other, becomes involved in him finding himself in the pit once again (this time in prison). Joseph’s identity also potentially comes into question. Thrown into new circumstances of servanthood in a powerful, wealthy household, a question confronts us: will Joseph succumb to his environment and let his physical surroundings dictate/shape his actions, or will the Divine Presence dominate his outlook? This setting seems to frame the chapters under study.

Several contrasts also seem to tie together chapters 38 and 39 & help us focus on his journey:

- Judah/Joseph: Judah’s absence of sexual control and failure to behave “righteously” or “responsibly” toward Tamar stand in stark contrast to Joseph’s moral self-control. Judah thinks of his own needs & desires in an atmosphere of freedom. Joseph thinks of his responsibilities to his master Potiphar in an environment of slavery.
- Tamar/Potiphar’s wife: Tamar is virtually powerless to change her circumstances; thus appears bereft of any meaningful future. Her choice is to act creatively from a stance of desperation. Potiphar’s wife, on the other hand, “*is the only female in the book of Genesis described with power language!*” (Rick Marris, *Embracing the Call of God*, p. 165). She has position and power and exploits both fully.
- Tamar/Joseph: In the two contrasts above, Joseph and Tamar act “righteously.” Joseph appears to be responding less out of sexual implication, than to one of an impending violation of trust. Both cling to their views of what is “right” with regard to God and others.