

“A STUDY IN CONTRAST”

Chapter 36 begins with the formula that we have seen repeated several times already in the book of Genesis: the words “These are the generations of...” This phrase is an important structural marker in the book of Genesis, appearing a total of ten times in all. It is repeated twice in the verses that we have just read, and it occurs for the last time in Genesis in 37:2. It is the presence of this phrase in that verse, indicating the beginning of a new section, that leads many to include 37:1 in conjunction with chapter 36. This directs our attention to the contrast between Esau and Jacob, and I am going to elaborate on that in just a moment.

The three uses of the “generations” formula in chapters 36 and 37 tell us that we are at a point of transition in the book of Genesis. The focus is shifting from one family history to another. As I said in my sermon on chapter 35, even though Jacob will remain alive until the end of the book, the spotlight will now turn away from the life of Jacob to the lives of his children. But before moving on from the account of Jacob to that of Jacob’s children, Moses gives us an account of the line of Esau. And in doing so, he is following the same pattern that he has employed previously in Genesis, where the family history of the rejected line is given first and is then followed by a much more extensive family history of the covenant line. We saw this in chapters 4 and 5, where the descendants of Cain were listed before the descendants of Seth; and we saw it again in chapter 25, where the generations of Ishmael were listed before the generations of Isaac. Moses is doing the same thing in the passage we have just read. He is giving us the

history of the rejected line before moving on to a more extensive account of the line of promise.

Now, we might wonder why God would want us to have this information about the descendants of Esau. Why is this genealogy given to us as a part of holy Scripture? I think that we can identify at least three reasons. First, there is the fact that God had promised to make Esau into a nation. Remember what he said to Rebekah when she was pregnant with Jacob and Esau. He said, “Two nations are in your womb.” Well, by giving us this genealogy, the Lord shows us that he brought those words to their fulfillment. Esau was in fact made into a great nation, the Edomite nation.

A second reason behind the inclusion of this passage in God’s Word is due to the fact that the Edomites would prove to be a perennial enemy to the people of Israel. In the book of Numbers, when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, it was the Edomites who refused to grant them passage through their territory. Then, in 2 Samuel, David subjected the Edomites to his rule, bringing to fulfillment the Lord’s prediction at their birth that Esau, the older, would serve Jacob, the younger. And then later, at the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah, the Edomites captured fleeing Israelites and turned them over to the Babylonians, an action that caused the Lord to pronounce his judgment against Edom through the prophet Obadiah. The point is, the histories of Israel and Edom were intertwined with each other, and this is another reason why we have this family history of Esau.

And a third reason why we have this account is because of how it sets a contrast between God's people and the people of this world. This theme of contrast is emphasized in the text itself by how the generations of Esau are inserted right in the midst of the story of Jacob and his children. We are meant to pay attention to the way in which Esau and his line differs from the covenant line.

This is a very significant point, a point that is set in tension with another key theme in the book of Genesis. As we have noted throughout our study of this book, the covenant people do not always appear in a very flattering light. In fact, it is very often the case that special attention is given to their sinfulness and their shortcomings. And we have said that this serves to underscore the fact that these people, just like all of God's people, were saved by God's grace alone and not because of anything inherently good or deserving in themselves.

This is undoubtably true. It is clearly taught throughout the Scriptures. However, it is just as true that there is an observable difference between the covenant people and the people of the world. Because of the working out of God's gracious purposes in the lives of the elect, there is a noticeable contrast between them and the non-elect. We can see this contrast in this description of the generations of Esau, and I want to take the remainder of this sermon to point out three specific ways in which this passage shows us how the people of the world differ from the people of God.

First, this passage shows us that *the people of the world are characterized by being thoroughly absorbed into the world*. Esau was "one flesh" with the world. We see this in

verses 1-3, where it says that Esau took his wives from the Canaanites and from the descendants of Ishmael. We saw earlier in Genesis how these wives were a source of grief to his father and mother. He forsook the covenant and intermarried with the ungodly people around him, a people whom God had told Abraham would eventually be dispossessed due to their wickedness. [see Gen. 15:16] Esau's willingness to intermarry with the Canaanites and Ishmaelites stands in sharp contrast to the lengths to which Abraham went in order to ensure that his son Isaac did not intermarry with the Canaanites. You will remember how Abraham sent his servant back to the land from which he had come in order to find a bride for Isaac from among his own people. It was through that decision that the Lord brought Isaac and Rebekah together. And even though Isaac himself did not do the same for his own sons, the Lord worked providentially through Jacob's exile in Paddan-aram to ensure that he married within the people of Abraham. By choosing to marry outside of the covenant family, Esau solidified his status as one who stood outside of the covenant. He was "one flesh" with the world.

As far as how this applies to us, it obviously relates to the biblical teaching that says that Christians are only to marry other Christians. And it is very important that we talk about this often. We need to impress this upon our church's children, as well as the single adults in our congregation. They need to know that the criterion that should transcend all others when a Christian is looking for a marriage partner is that their prospective spouse should have a genuine and living faith in Jesus Christ. And we need to teach them not to be deceived by the ways in which Christianity has been watered down by the radical

individualism and subjectivism of our culture. There are many people around us who would call themselves Christians but who have little or nothing to do with the church. For this reason, it might be better for us to think not in terms of whether a person claims to be a Christian, but whether he is what we could describe as a “practicing Christian.” When a Christian is considering a potential marriage partner, he or she needs to ask, ‘In what way does this person practice their faith? Are they a member of a local church that is faithfully preaching Christ? Do they attend worship on a regular basis? Is their life showing fruit from the instruction and nurture that they are receiving at their church?’ When those kinds of questions are left unasked, people often find themselves marrying someone who claimed to be a Christian at the time, but who later proved to be a Christian in name only.

In addition to marriage, there is also a broader application of this principle. Esau’s decision to intermarry with the Canaanites and the Ishmaelites resulted in his estrangement from the people of God. And this is something that can happen in any number of ways. Christians need to take care to protect themselves and their families against the real danger of being absorbed into the world. Do we do the same things that the people of the world do? Do we love the same things that they love? If so, then we may be in real danger of being absorbed into the world.

A second way in which this passage shows us how the people of the world contrast with the people of God is by showing us that *the people of the world do not value the things that God has promised to his covenant people*. Esau took his family and his

possessions and he moved away from the promised land to the land of Seir. Now, it is true that the text says in verse 7 that Jacob and Esau's possessions were too great for the land to support them both, but this seems to be speaking only of one particular part of the promised land. For it was only back in chapter 34 that Hamor and Shechem were declaring that the land was large enough for them and for Jacob. By moving his family entirely outside the borders of the land of promise, Esau was cutting himself off from the blessings of the covenant.

This is a quality that is readily apparent in the lives of non-Christians. Non-Christians place no value upon the things that Christians hold most dear. Think of the greatest blessings that you have as a member of the body of Christ. What could be greater than the fellowship and communion that you enjoy with God through Jesus Christ? What could be better than knowing that you are at peace with God, that you have a righteous standing before God, that you have been adopted into God's family, that you have an eternal inheritance in God's kingdom? Such things mean the world to the Christian. But what are they to the non-Christian? They mean nothing to them. Such things are utterly worthless to them. Their minds are like that of Esau: they would gladly sell such an inheritance for a bowl of stew.

This is why it is so important for us to cherish the blessings that are poured out upon us in the gospel. We need to place a high value on these things. We need to remember that our ability to enjoy heaven is being conditioned by how well we enjoy heavenly realities in this life. As John Owen expressed it,

“Heaven, or eternal blessedness, is nothing but full enjoyment of those spiritual things which we now enjoy here on earth by faith.” [*Spiritual-Mindedness*, 233]

And as R.B. Kuiper writes,

“Communion with God is what makes heaven heaven. In corporate worship the church of God has a foretaste of heavenly bliss.” [*The Glorious Body of Christ*, 87]

The man or woman who cannot find refreshment and comfort through the church’s worship and the means of grace is a man or woman who has no reason to expect any refreshment and comfort in heaven.

One more way in which this passage shows us the contrast between the people of God and the people of the world is by showing us that *the people of the world often prosper while the church, and individual Christians, struggle*. Look again at verse 31, where it says this about the descendants of Esau: “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites.” And then compare this with 37:1, where it says this about Jacob: “Jacob lived in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan.” Esau moved on to Seir and he became the father of kings, while Jacob remained a sojourner, a pilgrim, in the land of Canaan. This is a picture of how the

people of this world have their happiness, their reward, their homeland in this life, while the people of God are still seeking a homeland, looking for a better country, setting their hope towards the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. It is also a clear example of how this-worldly prosperity is not necessarily a sign of divine favor. God certainly can bestow this-worldly blessings upon his people, and he often does so. We Americans, even those of us who are of relatively modest means, enjoy a degree of prosperity that would be unimaginable for most of the people who have ever lived. God certainly can grant prosperity as a blessing. But he can just as easily use it as a trial, or even as a form of judgment. And isn't this how prosperity functioned for Esau? What if Esau had moved to Seir and failed miserably? What would have happened if he had moved there and then lost everything? He might have returned to Canaan and asked Jacob for help. He might have moved back into the covenant circle. But because he prospered, he remained on the outside.

There is indeed a difference between the people of God and the people of this world. We are a holy people, a people set apart to belong to God. But the one thing that we always have to keep in mind whenever we think about this is the fact that it is only because of God's grace that this distinction exists. By nature, we are just as sinful as everyone else. And this is something that should greatly humble us. We should say, as Samuel Rutherford once said, "When I look to my guiltiness, I see that my salvation is one of our Saviour's greatest miracles." [*Letters*, 320] Or, in the words that we often sing,

*Why was I made to hear your voice,
and enter while there's room,
when thousands make a wretched choice,
and rather starve than come?*