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# The Surprising Prosperity of the Wicked

Genesis 36:1-37:1

*Russ Kennedy*

Don't you ever get tired of the bad guys winning? You do what is right, you obey the Lord, you try to live like God wants you and... what does it get you? But people live wicked lives, reject God, hate His Word, attack what we treasure, and they are prominent, rich and successful.

It just doesn't seem right. This is one of the great tensions in life for Christian people. Why do the wicked do well?

This period of pestilence and crisis for many has made it even worse. Good people suffer, are in hospital, have lost their businesses and their savings. Now wicked people have been rampaging through some of our biggest cities destroying what took many so long to save for, to buy or to build up.

The Psalmist wrestled with issue in a song that complains of the prosperity of the wicked. Asaph wrote this in Psalm 73 (New Living Translation).

- <sup>1</sup> Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those whose hearts are pure.
- <sup>2</sup> But as for me, I almost lost my footing.  
My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.
- <sup>3</sup> For I envied the proud  
when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.
- <sup>4</sup> They seem to live such painless lives;  
their bodies are so healthy and strong.
- <sup>5</sup> They don't have troubles like other people;  
they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.
- <sup>6</sup> They wear pride like a jeweled necklace  
and clothe themselves with cruelty.
- <sup>7</sup> These fat cats have everything  
their hearts could ever wish for!
- <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak only evil;  
in their pride they seek to crush others.
- <sup>9</sup> They boast against the very heavens,  
and their words strut throughout the earth.
- <sup>10</sup> And so the people are dismayed and confused,  
drinking in all their words.
- <sup>11</sup> "What does God know?" they ask.  
"Does the Most High even know what's happening?"
- <sup>12</sup> Look at these wicked people—  
enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.
- <sup>13</sup> Did I keep my heart pure for nothing?  
Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?
- <sup>14</sup> I get nothing but trouble all day long;  
every morning brings me pain.
- <sup>15</sup> If I had really spoken this way to others,  
I would have been a traitor to your people.

<sup>16</sup> So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper.  
But what a difficult task it is!

There it is isn't it? We try to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is!

Why is this significant for Genesis 36? 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. Esau prospers. This is sort-of in Israel's face...

## **His Personal Success (1-8)**

Esau's success was tied his becoming a Canaanite.

**36** These are the generations of Esau (that is, Edom). <sup>2</sup> Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, <sup>3</sup> and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth. <sup>4</sup> And Adah bore to Esau, Eliphaz; Basemath bore Reuel; <sup>5</sup> and Oholibamah bore Jeush, Jalam, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan.

<sup>6</sup> Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his livestock, all his beasts, and all his property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan. He went into a land away from his brother Jacob. <sup>7</sup> For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together. The land of their sojournings could not support them because of their livestock. <sup>8</sup> So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir. (Esau is Edom.)

What strikes me right away is the top and tail, the beginning and ending, of these two paragraphs. They appear as parenthesis in our ESV Bibles. But don't treat them as unimportant. Esau is Edom. Esau is the father of the Edomites. The generation that Moses is writing to would certainly know who the Edomites were. They had become the mortal enemies of Israel. This text is designed to connect the one group of Canaanites with Esau.

### **His wives were from the land (v.2-3)**

Esau takes Adah, Oholibamah, and Basemath to be his wives. Ada is a Hittite, Oholibamah is a Hivite and Basemath is an Ishmaelite. These are all Canaanite women. They are the women of the land.

### **His sons were born in the land (v.4-5).**

Esau's family grows. These wives bore him children. Here is the beginning of the tribe and later, nation of Edom. These children and their children and their tribe will occupy the land. It is not theirs. It was bequeathed by God to Jacob and his descendants. These sons were born in the land.

### **His riches were acquired in the land (v.6).**

While living in the land of Canaan he acquired vast wealth. Moses makes a point that Esau and therefore Edom have gained their riches from the land. This is both the direct blessing of God and the indirect of the "rain on the just and unjust alike."

### **His possessions became too great to share the land (v.6-7).**

Once again, we have the situation where the prosperity is so great that Esau and Israel (Jacob) cannot both live in the same region. But Esau knows that this is not his land. Israel is the one

who has received the inheritance. So Esau gathers up all that has made him great, his wives, his sons, his servants and his vast herds and moves on.

### **He moved out of the land and occupied the hill country of Seir (v.8).**

The vast land was not enough. It could not hold and sustain them both. So Esau moved into the hill country known as Seir. This became the land of Edom. It would be a place of much trouble for Israel.

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. Several later texts will tell us that Esau and Edom were rejected by God. He was not a believer. He was a wicked man. His descendants were wicked.

### **His Tribal Success (v9-41)**

Now comes one of those sections of Genesis that is challenging.

The names are challenging...

The purposes seem obscure...

The application is buried in warnings about misusing genealogies...

Yet in this text, Moses gives us a very clear structure. Let's see how that might help us.

### **The Generations (v.9-14)**

<sup>9</sup>These are the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir.

<sup>10</sup>These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz the son of Adah the wife of Esau, Reuel the son of Basemath the wife of Esau. <sup>11</sup>The sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho, Gatam, and Kenaz. <sup>12</sup>(Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz.) These are the sons of Adah, Esau's wife. <sup>13</sup>These are the sons of Reuel: Nahath, Zerah, Shammah, and Mizzah. These are the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. <sup>14</sup>These are the sons of Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon, Esau's wife: she bore to Esau Jeush, Jalam, and Korah.

We have "generations". This is meant to be successive generations of fathers and sons. This is a signpost. This is a Tel-dot. It is meant to say, "We are at the beginning or at the end of something." This is the end of Esau in the Jacob and Esau narrative.

### **The Chiefs (v.15-19)**

<sup>15</sup>These are the chiefs of the sons of Esau. The sons of Eliphaz the firstborn of Esau: the chiefs Teman, Omar, Zepho, Kenaz, <sup>16</sup>Korah, Gatam, and Amalek; these are the chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom; these are the sons of Adah. <sup>17</sup>These are the sons of Reuel, Esau's son: the chiefs Nahath, Zerah, Shammah, and Mizzah; these are the chiefs of Reuel in the land of Edom; these are the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. <sup>18</sup>These are the sons of Oholibamah, Esau's wife: the chiefs Jeush, Jalam, and Korah; these are the chiefs born of Oholibamah the daughter of Anah, Esau's wife. <sup>19</sup>These are the sons of Esau (that is, Edom), and these are their chiefs.

Moses lists the tribal chiefs by their parentage. 450 plus years have passed since Esau went to Seir and the writing of this text. So Israel knows, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, all the divisions of the nation of Edom. These chieftains likely have established territorial governance in their land.

## The Occupants (Sons) (v. 20-30)

<sup>20</sup>These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, <sup>21</sup>Dishon, Ezer, and Dishan; these are the chiefs of the Horites, the sons of Seir in the land of Edom. <sup>22</sup>The sons of Lotan were Hori and Hemam; and Lotan's sister was Timna. <sup>23</sup>These are the sons of Shobal: Alvan, Manahath, Ebal, Shepho, and Onam. <sup>24</sup>These are the sons of Zibeon: Aiah and Anah; he is the Anah who found the hot springs in the wilderness, as he pastured the donkeys of Zibeon his father. <sup>25</sup>These are the children of Anah: Dishon and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah. <sup>26</sup>These are the sons of Dishon: Hemdan, Eshban, Ithran, and Cheran. <sup>27</sup>These are the sons of Ezer: Bilhan, Zaavan, and Akan. <sup>28</sup>These are the sons of Dishan: Uz and Aran. <sup>29</sup>These are the chiefs of the Horites: the chiefs Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, <sup>30</sup>Dishon, Ezer, and Dishan; these are the chiefs of the Horites, chief by chief in the land of Seir.

These sons are the sons of tribes that already lived in Seir, or what became Edom. They were either conquered or absorbed into what became the nation of Edom. So Esau and his descendants became the dominant and eventually, the rulers over the native Seirites.

## The Kings (v.31-39)

<sup>31</sup>These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites. <sup>32</sup>Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom, the name of his city being Dinhabah. <sup>33</sup>Bela died, and Jobab the son of Zerah of Bozrah reigned in his place. <sup>34</sup>Jobab died, and Husham of the land of the Temanites reigned in his place. <sup>35</sup>Husham died, and Hadad the son of Bedad, who defeated Midian in the country of Moab, reigned in his place, the name of his city being Avith. <sup>36</sup>Hadad died, and Samlah of Masrekah reigned in his place. <sup>37</sup>Samalah died, and Shaul of Rehoboth on the Euphrates reigned in his place. <sup>38</sup>Shaul died, and Baal-hanan the son of Achbor reigned in his place. <sup>39</sup>Baal-hanan the son of Achbor died, and Hadar reigned in his place, the name of his city being Pau; his wife's name was Mehetabel, the daughter of Matred, daughter of Mezahab.

<sup>40</sup>These are the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their clans and their dwelling places, by their names: the chiefs Timna, Alvah, Jetheth, <sup>41</sup>Oholibamah, Elah, Pinon,

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 descendants 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.

**37** Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

But that is not the end of the story nor the end of Psalm 73. Asaph goes on to say:

<sup>17</sup> Then I went into your sanctuary, O God,  
and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.

<sup>18</sup> Truly, you put them on a slippery path  
and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction.

<sup>19</sup> In an instant they are destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors.

<sup>20</sup> When you arise, O Lord,  
you will laugh at their silly ideas  
as a person laughs at dreams in the morning.

<sup>21</sup> Then I realized that my heart was bitter,  
and I was all torn up inside.

<sup>22</sup> I was so foolish and ignorant—  
I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.

<sup>23</sup> Yet I still belong to you;  
you hold my right hand.

<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel,  
leading me to a glorious destiny.

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
I desire you more than anything on earth.

<sup>26</sup> My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,  
but God remains the strength of my heart;  
he is mine forever.

<sup>27</sup> Those who desert him will perish,  
for you destroy those who abandon you.

<sup>28</sup> But as for me, how good it is to be near God!  
I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter,  
and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.

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## Reflect and Respond

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.