

THE ROAD PAVED WITH GOD INTENTIONS, PART ONE

Sermon, August 9, 2020

Text: Selections from Genesis 37

Esther Pauline Friedman arrived in this world just seventeen minutes before her twin sister Pauline Esther Friedman (*yes, you heard that correctly; they were given the same names, only in reverse order. Esther Pauline would be nicknamed Eppy; Pauline Esther was nicknamed PoPo*). The identical twins grew up dressing alike, they took the same classes in school and for years even shared the same purse, with one set of keys, one comb, one lipstick. They slept in the same twin bed (*no pun intended*). The first time they were separated, in fact, was after their double wedding. Years later, the middle aged Esther Pauline landed a job replacing the original Ann Landers at the **Chicago Sun Times** (*Ann Landers was a pen name created by Chicago Sun Times advice columnist Ruth Crowley in 1943, taken over by Esther Pauline "Eppie" Lederer in 1955*). Just two months later, Pauline Esther Phillips started her own advice column with the **San Francisco Chronicle**, giving herself the pen name of Abigail Van Buren, which produced a lengthy estrangement between the two sisters. "Ann" (Esther) sniffed that her sister's column, "Dear Abby", was *"very imitative."* In the words of one commentator, "Ann" held a nearly biblical lifelong grudge that "Abby" had ripped her off by creating a cheap imitation of her work. The feud was on! For years these two women who dispensed advice to thousands could not resolve their own petty squabbles. Finally, the two were partly reconciled in 1964; they told journalists they were "very close," but their discord continued ... in 1981, 17 years after "making up," Abby made a catty public remark about Ann's facelift, basically saying, *"I'm quite opposed to chopping myself up, but it was her right. Why not? She needed one."* Reports are they finally reconciled before "Ann" passed away in 2002 at age 83, "Abby" died in 2013 at 94.

The Book of Genesis tells of several great sibling rivalries; we've spent the last few weeks looking at the competitive and feuding twins Jacob and Esau, we also have Isaac and half-brother Ishmael, and of course Cain and Abel. In today's reading, Joseph's story, it's a stacked sibling rivalry, there are ten brothers conspiring against one! The pace of Genesis slows down here when it gets to Joseph, with the book devoting far more attention to his life story than to anyone else's, carrying it all the way to the end of the book in Genesis 50. Little wonder, for Joseph lived one of the great adventure stories of all time. Cast away in a deep desert cistern by his angry brothers, then sold into slavery, then a condemned prisoner on a trumped up charge of sexual assault, Joseph rose to become the number two ruler of the then-greatest empire on Earth and wound up saving thousands, if not millions, with his astute administration of affairs and sharing his unique God-given talents and gifts. To Joseph, I'm sure it seemed to be an apparently hellish road, but we see it now as a road paved with God's saving intentions.

July 5 we talked about the proverb, *"The road to hell is paved with good intentions."* Something many if not all of us know from at-times bitter experience is that well-intended actions ... actions we did, or did not, do, and/or actions done to us by the capricious actions of others ... can often have disastrous results. In the providence of God, however, seemingly disastrous actions can wind up with God intended results. One might say the road to heaven ... the road to wholeness, shalom, salvation ... is paved with God intentions. Time and again the Scriptures tell us how God can work all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes ... and live accordingly. The saga of Joseph begins with the near-tragic events recorded here in chapter 37.

One more story before we look at the biblical account: In 1965, following the success of his television series **Gilligan's Island**, scriptwriter Sherwood Schwarz conceived an idea for a new show after reading an article in the *Los Angeles Times* that asserted, *"40% of marriages in the United States had a child or children from a previous marriage."* Mr. Schwarz set to work on a pilot script for the new show, and then passed it around to the only three television networks in existence at the time, ABC, CBS and NBC. All three loved the script, but all three wanted to make substantial changes, which Mr. Schwarz refused. So, the script was shelved for three years, until ABC changed its corporate mind and decided to take the script as is ... and **The Brady Bunch** was born. **The Brady Bunch** aired from September 26, 1969 to August 30, 1974 and was subsequently syndicated around the world. I'm told that ever since syndication an episode of **The Brady Bunch** has been broadcast every single day somewhere in the world through at least 2008, 43 years since it was first aired (*as there were only 117 episodes, that is a LOT of reruns!*). It has been speculated that one reason for its popularity is that refreshingly absent from the scripts was any political commentary ... especially regarding the Vietnam War, which was being waged at its largest extent during the height of the series. Somewhere in my house we have all seasons on DVDs; they were a favorite of Hannah's.

The blended family in the Brady Bunch was two who got married and brought the children of their previous marriages to live together in a new household. Life as a "blended family" is not easy, although the Brady Bunch

made it look easy. But rarely, if ever, did we see them grappling with the darker challenges of a blended family; the Brady kids had their issues and conflicts, but they were pretty much the standard fare of growing up in any kind of family. We didn't see the intense rivalries, arguments and struggles between children over which group is unfairly favored and which is unfairly disciplined. We didn't see the deep grief issues of losing a parent, or the bitter custody issues involving former spouses, divided loyalties having a tug-a-war in a child's heart (*in the show, Mike was widowed, but Carol's situation was never defined ... Mr. Schwarz had her originally as divorced, but the network excised that from the script, so no mention was ever made of the circumstances in which her first marriage ended*). Also, most blended families don't have the luxury of an all-competent, even-tempered maid/nanny "Alice" working full time keeping the house spotlessly clean, meals cooked, clothes ironed and washed ... and a Dad who obviously made a good living, yet always seemed to be home, was never distracted or preoccupied with concerns of work, seemingly having all the time in the world to relate to his family. And the Bradys never had to deal with the birth of children into the new relationship, which can generate a whole new level of jealousy and competition between the "new" family and the "old" families and, ultimately, about which are members of the "real" family. Now, a blended family can be and often is an experience of rich blessing, grace, and love, especially when you have parents like the Bradys who always support each other and do their utmost to treat all the children equally. But television isn't life. In real life, it's never easy.

As we pick up in the life of Jacob today, his family was something of a blended family, but this blended family is no Brady Bunch. There was one husband who basically had twelve sons by four women, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah (*just as a quick aside; this would take a sermon in itself to address cogently, but for now I'll just point out the Bible never condones polygamy; it merely describes what some practiced ... Scripture does not always pause to moralize on the events in the narrative. Not surprisingly, though, we have no record of polygamy ever producing good relationships between the wives! The Law of Moses later censures those who violate monogamy, and as Jesus reiterated in the Gospels, polygamy was not God's original plan*). The sons of Jacob ... or Israel, as he was renamed in Chapter 32 ... were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin, all of whom became the heads of their own family groups, later known as the "*Twelve Tribes of Israel*." Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin; Joseph, her firstborn, would have been fifteen years of age at that time. Joseph and Benjamin were the youngest of the twelve. Jacob apparently made a mistake every parent should studiously avoid: he played favorites; he favored Joseph over the others. Maybe Joseph was Jacob's favored child because he was the oldest son of his favorite wife (*and old enough to remember and reminisce about her*). Or maybe he just liked Joseph better than his older sons because Joseph hasn't lived long enough to give Jacob all the grief he got from his adult sons over the years (*some speculate that's why grandparents love and dote on their grandchildren!*). Whatever the reason, it was no secret Jacob loved Joseph more than his older boys.

We read dad gave Joseph a special coat. The King James Version describes it as "*a coat of many colors*", the New International Version has "*a richly ornamented robe*" (*and the Donny Osmond Version called it the "Technicolor Dream Coat"*). Whatever the translation, it is clear it wasn't a work coat ... and it seems, um, Joseph wore it a lot while his brothers were working. His brothers resented the robe in large part because they despised Joseph for being the favorite son. We are also told Joseph would return from the work fields from time to time and bring back to his father a "bad report" on his older brothers. So they also resent him for being a young little snitch. But the straw that broke the brothers' backs was when they had to listen to Joseph tell them about his dreams. In one of these dreams, Joseph and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly Joseph's sheaf stood up, and all his brothers' sheaves bowed to it. In another dream, it was the sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bowing to Joseph. To make a long story short, he angers his brothers so much they decide to practice some serious social distancing from him.

And it was on that one day when Jacob sent Joseph to Hebron to check on the brothers who were in the field, something in the brothers snapped. They thought about killing this youngster whom they perceived to be the little spoiled brat, but ended up selling him into slavery to some passing Ishmaelite traders. Then they took his despised robe, spread animal blood over it, took it to their father and said, "Joseph is dead." Neither the brothers nor their grieving father, Jacob, who swallows their story of a wild animal attack, ever expected to see Joseph again.

God, however, had His greater intentions. Joseph's strange dreams, which got him into so much trouble with his brothers, turn out to have been God-given dreams. This and a God given ability to interpret dreams proves not only to be Joseph's salvation, but the salvation of many ... including the saving of his entire family, the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. Again, in the providence of God, seemingly disastrous actions can and often do wind up with God-intended results. Time and again the scriptures tells us how God can work all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to this purposes ... and who live their lives faithfully and accordingly no matter what life happens to throw at them.

We will continue with this story next week.