

Gen. 37:12-36; Jan. 16, 2011

### **Prayer**

At the end of last week's passage from Gen. 35, we noted that Rachel died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. The remainder of this book then shifts its focus to Rachel and Jacob's firstborn son, Joseph, and particularly the ways God used him to lead and provide for the chosen people. Chapter 37 opens by telling us that at the age of 17, Joseph had two dreams in which his 11 other brothers bowed down to him in homage. While we are not told that these dreams were from the Lord, it was common in that day for dreams to be taken as a sign, whether from Israel's God or from whatever god a people chose to worship. Rather than respect the message of Joseph's dreams, his jealous brothers hated him even more than they already did.

With this in mind, let us turn to the second part of that chapter, **Gen. 37:12-36**:

"Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them." "Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?" He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?" "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—

the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm, and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?”

Then they got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.” He recognized it and said, “It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.”

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “No,” he said, “in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.” So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

*This is the Word of the Lord.*

As we read this story one of the benefits we have is 3500 years of hindsight. We know how the story turns out for Joseph and the people of God. As we’ll see in coming weeks, Joseph ends up being Pharaoh’s right-hand-man, and saves his family from starvation during a famine. Genesis 50 shows us that Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery. He treats them kindly and says, “What you intended for harm, God intended for good.” Our distance from the events allows us to see that Joseph grows up to become a remarkable man of God.

But for Joseph at age 17, it's a different story. Again, Joseph was the firstborn son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel, and after her death Joseph and Benjamin are their father's living links to her. Clearly Jacob doted on Joseph so much that jealousy and resentment festered among the other sons. The richly ornamented, elegantly woven robe Jacob gave to Joseph was evidence of this blatant favoritism. On top of that, we're told that Joseph tattled on his brothers to Jacob. Joseph comes across as a spoiled brat.

Maybe Joseph was naïve, or audacious, or foolish, or a combination of all three, when he wore that provocative robe to go find his brothers 65 miles away in Shechem. We are not told why they were pasturing their flock so far away, but obviously Joseph can't run home to daddy if his brothers mistreat him. Still, Jacob must have been clueless to send his favorite son on this errand. Joseph must have known that his brothers intensely disliked him, so it makes no sense that he would put himself at their mercy, and wear the hated garment to boot. Joseph also knew that these same brothers had recently murdered and plundered the village where their sister Dinah had been raped. These violent men can see his robe from a distance and have time to plan Joseph's demise. Joseph is set up for disaster from the get-go. ///

Or, at least that's one way to look at it. Using our hindsight again, we know that the Lord needed Joseph to be someone very different than a spoiled tattletale to be useful in the divine plan of redemption. God needed someone who was responsible, wise, and disciplined, someone who was considerate of others, who valued and appreciated the blessings in his life. The 17-year-old Joseph who was thrown into a cistern was not that person. But God used these circumstances, and years as an Egyptian slave, to accomplish holy work in Joseph's heart.

Let's imagine for a moment what might have gone through Joseph's mind when he was sold into slavery. //// "Wait a second. In my dreams, those brothers were supposed to bow down to me. I'm the one with the beautiful robe! Dad's never given them a gift like that! Yet a few moments ago, I was beneath them in a cistern, completely at their mercy. Now I am destined to spend the rest of my life in Egypt as a slave. Lord, what's going on? Life isn't turning out how it was supposed to."

Sometimes this crosses our minds, doesn't it? We face trials and disappointments, delays and losses, and things don't happen the way we expected or wanted them to.

People get sick. The stock market tumbles and retirement funds collapse. Relationships end. People are wrongly accused. Friends abandon us. Front steps need replacing and it takes forever. Sometimes things happen that seem to make no sense at all, and power or control in our lives seems to be swept away. We do our very best, and still, things don't work out right. And in moments like that, we naturally ask the Lord, "What's going on?"  
////

There once was a cowboy who met with an insurance agent to apply for a policy. The agent asked the cowboy, "Have you ever had an accident?" The cowboy thought for a minute, and said, "Nope, but a bronc did kick in two of my ribs last summer, and a couple of years ago a rattler bit me on the ankle."

The agent was astonished, and asked, "Wouldn't you call those accidents?" "Naw," the cowboy replied. "They hurt me on purpose!"

While we would not enjoy having our ribs kicked in or being bitten by a rattlesnake, the cowboy points us to the Biblical idea that from God's perspective, nothing in our lives is an accident. Nothing that happened to Joseph in Genesis 37 surprised God, though it was definitely a shock to Joseph. God did not make Joseph's brothers throw him into a pit or sell him as a slave, but the Lord allowed and used those situations ultimately for God's glory and Joseph's benefit.

Joseph the spoiled brat was drastically humbled. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he was alone, away from his father and the comforts of home. Since Joseph was not with his brothers when they were shepherding, he might have had a lighter workload as the favored son. Being a slave with a lot of work and little to eat would have been a major adjustment. But these apparent misfortunes were not accidents. The Lord worked through them so Joseph could become the man the Lord needed in Egypt. In the same way, the Lord uses trials in our lives to shape us into who we need to be for His good purposes.

Now having said that, life still doesn't seem fair at times, and we have our share of pain and heartache. About 15 years ago there was a Christian family in Ohio driving down the highway when they ran over a piece of metal lying in the road. The metal flew up, nicked their gas tank, and within seconds their minivan was engulfed in flames. By the time the parents got out of their front seats and turned to save their children, all six

had already perished. The parents stood there on the side of the road watching their children, and all of their hopes and dreams, go up in smoke.

What's important to the Lord is our response when things go wrong. This Christian couple spoke on the news after watching their children die in such a grisly way. The parents gave public witness about God's love for them, that He had been with them and cared for them in their traumatic time of horrible loss. The husband said that he did not know why this had happened, and probably never would. But he knew that God is good, God was with them and loved them, and they could rejoice that their children were in the presence of their Savior.

Think about what Joseph's reaction could have been to the trauma in his life. He might have become bitter against his family, and angry with the Lord for letting such things happen to him. He could have refused to go along with God's plans since God seemed to abandon him. He could have despaired and given up hope. He could have turned away from the one true god to worship Egypt's pantheon. Instead, as we'll see more in the coming weeks, Joseph was humbled and transformed by hardship, and grew into a faithful man God used powerfully to impact world history.

One thought Satan likes to snag Christians with is the lie that being a Christian should make life easier. In fact, there are ways that the Christian life is much more difficult! God never promises us a rose garden. If we are tempted to think otherwise, we should simply think of our Lord Jesus. His life was far from a bed of roses, yet no one ever experienced more joy or demonstrated more love toward others. Why? Because Jesus was always able to trust that His Father's will was perfect, thoroughly good, and right. Even in the ultimate moment of human crisis at the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was still able to say, "Father, not my will, but thy will be done."

Over the next several weeks, we will be considering how Joseph matured as a person of faith when faced with adversity. In the same way, when we encounter obstacles, we can give up on God, become bitter, worry, or despair—OR, we can imitate our Savior. We can trust in the Lord with all of our heart, and not lean on our own limited understanding. We can look up from the bottom of the pit with confidence that our Heavenly Father has not forgotten us, and nothing can ever separate us from His love. And we can be sure that like Joseph, sooner or later we will see the Lord's hand guiding

our lives. From God's view, there are no accidents and surprises, because we know that our sovereign Lord works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. *Let us pray.*