

Genesis 37:1-4 Genesis 37:12-28

37 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2 This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.[a] 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him 12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." 14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, 15 and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves[a] that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. 28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

---

The first Bible Study I ever attended my pastor was asked "Which is your favorite Book of the Bible?" After a moment or two, he replied "Genesis. I have met every one of them."

While Genesis is first and foremost remembered for the magnificent opening passage about Creation. It very quickly turns to a long series of stories about human beings, their interactions, their faith and their all too human strengths and weaknesses. It really is more a Book about Human Nature than a Book about Creation. Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Esau, Jacob, Leah, Rachel and of course Joseph. The story of Joseph takes up a considerable amount of the text and yet it is very different from all the others. The scripture presents the other named characters stories in the form of short, self-contained incidents. Little snapshots. Whereas the story of Joseph resembles a coherent short novel with a subtle and well-crafted plot. All the others have appearances of God, messages and oracles from God. Joseph never sees or hears God. He has dreams but there is no suggestion that these are direct "messages from God". Rather God works in the background, secretly guiding the course of events, even bringing good out of evil.

Joseph and his brothers story also all takes place in Egypt. A foreign land and culture.

His family is a poster child for dysfunction and oh so human.

Jacob is father favors Joseph more than any of his other sons. Joseph was the late arrival, the surprise child and his mother was Jacob's favorite wife.

Is it any wonder that his half-brothers resented him?

Jacob clearly spoiled him -- the famous coat of many colors. The original text is very difficult to translate but it is very obviously a very special, valuable and very public declaration of Jacob's favoritism. The boy seems to have had talents, especially in the interpretation of dreams but he grew up with a severe case of "assumed superiority". But he may well have been an annoying little braggard.

After all he does keep telling them about his dream where, in the words of the children's rhyme, he is "king of the castle and they are all dirty little rascals".

Or as the scripture expresses it: "when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him"

So, the brothers look down on him and treat him as the lowest of the low. Whatever, the reason all the resentment and anger boils over and they attack, almost kill him and then sell him as a slave. Returning home to break the news to Dad. Probably with a fake tear and catch in the voice, while inwardly rejoicing!

As I said this is the poster child for dysfunctional families. If you could go back in time and change history, you might say to Jacob the father: "Don't play favorites with Joseph! His brothers hate him!" Joseph had already caused dissension when at age 17, Joseph was shepherding the flock with his brothers, acting as a helper. Four of them were misbehaving in the field, so "Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father" (v. 2). Joseph ratted out Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher -- threw them under the bus.

If you could travel back in time, you might say to Joseph: "Don't be a snitch! Your brothers are going to terminate you!"

Sure enough, the situation went from bad to worse when Joseph was sent to check on his brothers as they pastured their father's flock. That fateful day when they are all far from home, working hard and who shows up but "the brat"!

Send by Dad to check up on them! Was he going to tell on them again? And why had he not been with them on this trip in the first place? Was it perhaps because Jacob no longer allows his precious youngest to get his hands or his coat dirty? Or was it because Jacob sees more value in Joseph as a spy?

The brothers said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams'" (vv. 19-20).

If you could, you might say to the brothers: "Don't do it! You'll never get away with murder!" Fortunately, the eldest brother Reuben talked some sense into his younger siblings. "Let us not take his life," he said. "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness but lay no hand on him." Reuben's plan was to rescue Joseph later and return him to his father (vv. 21-22).

Give the eldest brother credit. He made a good decision, right in the middle of this tragic tale of favoritism, hatred, snitching and blood-lust.

When Joseph arrived, they stripped him of his robe and threw him in an empty pit. Feeling hungry after their exertions, they sat down to eat. But as they were eating, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, carrying precious cargo to Egypt.

Between bites, middle brother Judah said to his siblings, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. So, they drew Joseph up and sold him to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver. And the traveling traders took Joseph to Egypt (vv. 23-28). If you could be an Avenger and do time travel, you might say to the brothers: "Glad you didn't kill him. But selling him into slavery? Is that a good Endgame?"

But we should never forget that God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, even when humans are acting in horrible ways.

The story continues, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials (37:36). That's bad. Joseph found favor in Potiphar's sight, and was put in charge of his house (39:4). That's good. Then Potiphar's wife saw how handsome Joseph was, and she said, "Lie with me" (39:7). That's bad. Joseph refused (39:8). That's good.

But Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of misconduct, and he was thrown into prison (39:20). That's bad. Then God showed him love, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer (39:21). That's good. Bad, good, bad, good, bad, good. Clearly, God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, even when humans are misbehaving.

While in prison, Joseph became an interpreter of dreams, and eventually he offered insight into the dreams of Pharaoh. He was released from prison and rose to power in Egypt, becoming second-in-command to Pharaoh himself. Eventually, famine struck the entire region, and people from many countries came to buy bread in Egypt.

Among the hungry people were Joseph's brothers. At first, Joseph did not reveal his identity, and treated them harshly. But eventually, he agreed to help them and said, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people" (50:20). At the end of the story, Joseph forgave his brothers and provided for them, as God wanted him to do.

"You intended to do harm to me," said Joseph, naming clearly that his brothers did a great evil to him. But knowing that God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, he also said, "God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people."

In every time and place and situation, God is working God's purposes out. Sometimes we humans cooperate with these purposes, and sometimes we don't. But nothing deters God in the work of saving people from destruction. Even the bad things that we would like to change — in world history and in our own personal histories — can be transformed into good by God.

God is not responsible for the evil that people do, but history and experience show that God can turn

bad into good.

God did it with Joseph and his brothers. God did it with Jesus on the cross.

Nothing is wasted with God. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, they set the stage for his rise in Egypt. When Jesus died and was buried, he was put in the right place for resurrection.

I can't consider Joseph the dreamer without thinking of that other great dreamer, Martin Luther King Jr. Joseph had a "dream" which threatened his brothers' power and privilege. MLK had a "dream" of a new society, which threatened power and privilege. Some thought that they could kill the dream by killing the dreamer. Except, of course when the dream comes from God, then you can't kill the dream even if you kill the dreamer.

Jesus's resurrection proved that for all time. Amen.