

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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DHW

LESSON 28

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

CHAPTER 37

INTRODUCTION

This last section of Genesis focuses on Jacob's favourite son, Joseph. Although the opening verses of the chapter seem to close Jacob's life, strictly he continued to be the head of the family until his death (Gen. 49:33). Just before his death, he bestowed his prophetic blessings upon his sons. Joseph is the last of the four great patriarchs. His life relates how he, as an individual, expressed his faith in the promises of God through the circumstances of everyday life. The children of Israel were too small in number when they migrated into Egypt, and after the death of Joseph, the focus shifted to the growth and development of the children of Israel into a nation.

Joseph is one of the most beautiful characters in the Bible. More importantly, his life illustrates God's providential overruling of events to fulfil His plan and purposes for the individual, the

children of Israel, and for the world. Joseph is a shining example of godly living. He remained steadfast in his faith, love and service for God despite the trials that he faced. His experiences teach us *how to overcome envy, to face adversity, to resist sexual advances, to plan for the future, to forgive those who wrong us, to dispel doubts about forgiveness, to have faith in God's promises, to recognise the sovereignty of God even in the wrongs done to us by others.*¹ His life should lead us to imitate his virtues.

The real life drama chronicled here will instruct and challenge all who would seriously engage it. The following suggested outline of the chapter helps in our study:

- 1) Jacob settled with his family in Canaan (37:1-4);
- 2) Joseph related his two dreams to his family (37:5-11);
- 3) Joseph's brothers conspired to kill him (37:12-22);
- 4) Joseph was sold to some Midianite merchants who in turn sold him as a slave in Egypt (37:23-28)

¹ Leslie B. Flynn, *Joseph: God's Man in Egypt* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1979), 5-6.

- 5) Jacob's sons deceived him concerning Joseph, his favourite son (37:29-36).

STUDY THE WORD

Jacob Settles in the Promised Land

Jacob now settled in the land where his father was *a stranger*.

This word "stranger" is interesting, and in Hebrew it means "sojourner" or one who was passing through. However, he now settled in the Promised Land. His favourite son, Joseph was now seventeen years old. He worked together with his brothers, namely, Dan and Naphtali, sons of Bilhah, Gad, and Asher, sons of Zilpah, tending their father's flocks (v.2). Joseph brought *evil report* to Jacob, their father. The word "report" in Hebrew denotes bad news with intention to damage the ones reported on. Being the father's favourite son, his report of his brothers could have been exaggerated.

Joseph's brothers harboured feelings of resentment, jealousy and hatred against him. There are several reasons for their intense emotion. Firstly, Joseph reported the undisciplined lives of his brothers to Jacob. This would definitely result

in their resentment. Secondly, Jacob treated Joseph better than all his other sons because he was the first son of Rachel his favourite wife, and because he had him when he was quite advance in his age. Thirdly, Jacob made *a coat of many colours* only for Joseph (v.3). It was a princely colourful coat which was usually made of fine linen. Obviously, it was not meant to be worn for manual work like shepherding the sheep but for distinguishing the wearer to be superior to others. Thus, it appears that Joseph was given the duty and responsibility of overseeing his brothers in the tending of his father's flock.²

Whatever the reasons, Jacob's blatant favouritism was unwise. The brothers could not talk with Joseph in a friendly, calm, and affectionate way. They could not wish him well. They could not greet him with the usual courteous greetings.³ Partiality

² Verse 2—The Hebrew word "feeding," translated by the lexicon gives the meaning as "overseeing, superintending, governing, or presiding over." And the preposition "with" should appropriately be "to". So the clause there should read, "Joseph, being seventeen years old, was overseeing the flock to his brothers (the flock given to the charge of his brothers). This is evident when the brothers took the flock to Shechem to graze, Joseph remained at home and later Jacob sent him to see how his brothers were doing (v.14).

³ George Bush, 224.

on the part of their father bred jealousy among the siblings. Feelings of jealousy in turn will breed resentment and hatred. Jacob should know better to play favourites for he was loved less than his bother Esau whom Isaac loved more. He should have learned the damage done to the family of such partiality, which his parents (Isaac and Rebekah) had in the family. Yet he practised favouritism in his family. Could he not have seen the bad feelings among his sons? This is not good and it will ultimately lead to some disastrous end.

Joseph Relates His Two Dreams

Joseph dreamed two dreams. He told his brothers the first dream, and after that they hated him even more (v.5). In this dream he and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field. But his sheaf stood upright while all his brothers' sheaves made obeisance (bowed down deeply) to his sheaf (v.7). His brothers responded by saying: *Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us?* And they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then Joseph had another dream and he told it again to his brothers. In his

dream, *the sun and the moon, and the eleven stars made obeisance to him* (v.9). He also told this dream to his father but his father rebuked him. Initially, Jacob expressed in disbelief: *What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?* Though his brothers envied him, Jacob changed his attitude and kept Joseph's words in his heart (v.11). Jacob rebuked him because he might have suspected some spiritual pride on the part of Joseph.

The two dreams were one and the same. The second confirmed the import of the first. If it was only one isolated dream, it might be misinterpreted. Jacob took the meaning of these dreams to heart, for Joseph's double dreams were God-given. There is no question about it as it was not a concoction by Joseph himself. God in times past had spoken to His people in dreams. This is one case. God-given dreams come in pairs. It means that the meaning of the dream is firmly decided by God and it would surely be fulfilled.

Joseph's Brothers Conspire to Kill Him

Joseph's brothers had taken their father's flocks to feed in Shechem, which was about 50 miles from Hebron, where they were living. After what had happened there some fifteen years earlier, it seemed strange that they would venture back to Shechem. It is plausible that they might wish to check the land which Jacob had bought (33:19). Whatever the reason, Jacob could have felt uneasy. He assumed that Joseph knew that, and he sent Joseph to see how they were doing and to report back to him. Joseph willingly obeyed his father. Joseph set out for Shechem. It would take him about five days to walk to Shechem. Hebron was about twenty miles to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem it was a farther thirty miles north to Shechem. He reached Shechem but could not find his brothers. He was wandering in the field, and interestingly, a certain unknown man asked him (v.15): *What seekest thou?* This event is nothing short of God's providence as this wandering and delay on the part of Joseph was important as it will be revealed later on. The man said that he heard the

brothers said that they would go to Dotham, which was another thirteen miles northwest of Shechem. Joseph would have travelled altogether 63 miles (about 100 km) from Hebron, where he first started. In addition, Dotham was very near the coastal trade route passing through the plains of Jezreel between Syria in the north and southward down to Egypt. Slave trafficking was a common practice in those days.

Joseph's brothers saw him coming. Before he reached them, they conspired to kill him. They were so full of hate against him that they did not call him by name but addressed him as *this dreamer cometh* (v.19). The brothers' plan was to kill Joseph and throw him into a pit (an empty cistern). And when they got home they would lie to their father that a wild beast had killed him (v.20). They wanted to kill Joseph so that his dreams would fall through. When Reuben knew about it for he was absent when they concocted their plan, he was against it. He managed to persuade them not to kill him but just to cast him into the pit. Reuben said (v.22a): *Shed no blood*. The subject of the verb is "you" plural indicating that he had no part in the plan. His

intention was that he would return without the knowledge of his brethren to rescue Joseph. Reuben's act and intention were noble. There are a few possible reasons why Reuben wanted to save his brother Joseph. Firstly, being the eldest, he might have felt it was his responsibility to save his brother. Secondly, he might have been convicted of his affair with Bilhah, and now wished to redeem himself by saving his father's favourite son in order to regain his father's favour.

Joseph Is Sold a Slave to Merchants

Providentially, the brothers listened to Reuben. When Joseph arrived, they did not kill him. Instead they stripped him of his colourful coat and cast him into a pit. Their brothers' understanding was that Joseph would die a slow death of starvation without drink, food, and exposure to punishing weather. That would be a wicked and cruel form of death. Of course the brothers did not know of Reuben's hidden plan to rescue Joseph later. While they sat down to eat, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites from Gilead (on the west bank of Jordan) with camels bearing their merchandise of spices to Egypt.

Judah, who was apparently troubled over the wicked scheme, and not knowing Reuben's secret plan, persuaded his brothers to sell Joseph to the merchants. He reasoned with them on the basis that rather than having blood in their hands they should sell Joseph to the merchants. In addition, Joseph was their brother.

Strangely, the brothers agreed. They lifted Joseph out of the pit and sold him to Midianites-Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. This caravan of Midianites and Ishmaelites was a mixed group but their ethnic groups were used interchangeably.⁴ Joseph was saved but he was brought to Egypt. The merchants sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, a captain in Pharaoh's army.

The divine chronicler writes (v.28): *Then. . . they drew and lifted*

⁴ The Ishmaelite traders were made up of the descendants of Abraham through Keturah and also the Midianites who were residents of the Arabah with whom the Ishmaelites had intermarried. Compare **Judges 8:22** *Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.* ²³ *And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.* ²⁴ *And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)* – R. Kent Hughes, p.446

up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. Observe the quick succession of the phrases which are underscored – three verbs and the names of Joseph are mentioned three times. This is evident again of the providence of God, who was in control of the wicked deeds of men to turn for good in fulfilment of His plan (Romans 8:28, 31). But in the minds of the brothers, that was the end of Joseph. They thought that they had removed the thorn in their flesh for good. The wickedness of man knows no boundaries!

Jacob Is Deceived by His Sons

Reuben was away when Joseph was sold. He returned to the group to find Joseph missing. He was grieved and helpless. He said (v.30): *And he returned..... and I, whither shall I go?* It is a feeling of despair. How he loved his brother Joseph. He should have first confronted his brothers and persuaded them not to kill and set him free. But he was weak and wavering. He was indecisive. Now he had to face his father and give an account because he was the eldest.

The brothers killed a goat and dipped Joseph's colourful coat in goat's blood. They brought it to Jacob and said (v. 32): *This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no.* Note the reference to Joseph's coat—*thy son's coat*. The brothers did not even say their brother's name. That goes to show how divided the family was. It is the height of disrespect and impudence to their father. It was also brutal cruelty. They intended to hurt their father for he had loved Joseph more than them. Jacob recognised the coat and believed that Joseph had been killed by a beast. It was a great blow to him and the sons saw how their father grieved and sorrowed over the death of Joseph. They tried to comfort him (v.35). All the brothers' report and words of comfort were hypocritical and dishonest.

Thus we see how one sin begets another sin. The brothers sold Joseph away. Then they lied to Jacob so as to cover up their sin. Next they pretended to comfort their father - lies upon lies to cover up their wicked deeds. One other thing is that Jacob, who once deceived Isaac, his father, by using a goat and wearing Esau's clothes, was now

being deceived in the same way by his sons. What an irony!

PRACTICAL VALUE

Although the name of God is not mentioned in this chapter, we are aware of His hidden hand directing the affairs of men in concord with His plan and purpose. Joseph's dual dreams which were similar were God-given. God foreknew the state of this broken family which was His chosen people with whom He had covenanted. God therefore would turn even their wicked deeds to fulfil and accomplish His will. Joseph's meeting with his brother in Dotham was timely, his deliverance from his wicked brothers was providential, and he being sold as a slave in Egypt was in God's plan to save His people.

Joseph must have been puzzled and tormented by the turn of events. Where was the fulfilment of God's promises in the two dreams? Where was the God whom he trusted? Yet God had deliberately allowed this to happen. Through suffering, Joseph was being moulded by the Potter for the exalted position of leadership in the land of Egypt in the future. So, if we love God and do His will, we should not fear what may happen to

us. In our experiences of bad situations, we need to keep trusting Him who keeps His promises to His blood-bought children.

Partiality, envy, and hatred usually go hand in hand. People, by nature, are prone to strong emotions when they feel discriminated or disfavoured. We observe them in families, in organisations, and even in public places. Parental favouritism again provoked family discord and deception. We should guard ourselves against such behaviour and conduct. If we see traces of these things in our family and our extended family (the church), we should nib them in the bud.

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