

## Genesis 37 The Dreamer

This morning we begin a new series of studies in the life of Joseph – one of the great stories of the Old Testament. As with any story, it's good to have in mind the story's background, which is the promise that the Lord gave to Joseph's great grandfather Abraham back in Genesis 12. **Read Genesis 12:1-3**. And the story of Joseph is really the story of the Lord continuing to work out these wonderful promises to Abraham. In particular, Genesis 37-50 is the story of how God takes the descendants of Abraham down into Egypt for a time. Our story begins – **read verse 1**. But we shall soon see how the family of Jacob are taken by the Lord *from* the land of Canaan and down into Egypt. For there, the Lord would save them from a famine coming on the whole region. There the Lord would enlarge them from a man with 12 sons into a numerous nation of people, and there the Lord would reveal himself to the Israelites as the one true God, the Saviour God, who would bring his chosen people out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

And so the story of Joseph is the story of the Lord working out his covenant promises to Abraham and ultimately the story of God blessing the world through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. But alongside this longer narrative, the tale of Joseph is one of the classic stories of God's providence in our lives. In other words, the things which happen in our lives are not just random or meaningless or mistakes. God is never out of control. Things never take him by surprise. For all things are ordered by God and are sent ultimately to fulfil his great purposes. The key verse of Joseph is well known. **Read Genesis 50:20**. Here is a truth that Joseph perhaps did not realise at first, but certainly came to realise. And it's a truth which God wants us to realise.

The Lord does not make mistakes. Things do not 'slip through his net'. The circumstances of our lives are all intended for a purpose and that purpose is good. Another statement of God's providence is found in **Romans 8:28**. The providence of God is an extremely important truth for us to grasp and hold onto. It changes the way we approach life and view events, and it helps us to cast our cares upon the Lord for he does love us. He is the sovereign God who does all things well. And we are to trust him.

Then the other thing to say about the character of Joseph is that like many others in the Bible, Joseph is a *type* of Christ. That is to say, his life reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ and points us forward to Christ - who is the fulfilment of the ages and who is our Saviour, our hope and our life.

Well this morning we consider the first chapter of this wonderful story. The first 11 verses are about **Joseph** who is **hated by his brothers**. This, perhaps more than anything else is the dominant thought of the opening section because three times we are told the same thing – the brothers hated him (4, 5, 8).

**Read verses 1-4**. There were at least four things which contributed to the brothers' hatred of Joseph. The first was that Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. We are told that this was because *Joseph was born to him in his old age* (3). It's probably a reference to Joseph's mother, Rachel. She had been the woman Jacob had first fallen in love with. But Jacob had been cruelly tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah first, before he then married Rachel. Jacob had also been persuaded into taking Rachel's and Leah's maid servants, Bilhah and Zilpah as his concubines. But it was only in later years that Rachel was able to bear children - first Joseph and then Benjamin. And so this seems to be the main reason that Joseph was loved best – he was Rachel's firstborn.

Another reason contributing to the hatred of Joseph's brothers was the *position* Jacob has given Joseph within the family. For Joseph had been given the position of leadership over the others. Joseph was considered the firstborn son. Now the natural firstborn of Jacob was Reuben. But in Genesis 35:22 we are told how Reuben sinned against his father by sleeping with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah. Simeon and Levi had also fallen out of favour by their disgraceful behaviour towards the people of Shechem in Genesis 34. And so the favoured position of leadership within the family had been given to Joseph.

And this privilege was symbolised by the *richly ornamented robe* or 'coat of many colours' which Joseph was given to wear. It was a garment whose sleeves went down to the wrists and whose hem went down to the ankles – different from others garments which were short sleeved and ended at the knee. But this richly ornamented coat was worn by someone who did not do physical work. Rather he acted as a manager and supervisor of others.

A third reason contributing to the hatred of the brothers was the reports that Joseph brought Jacob against his brothers. We are told of one such report in verse 2. **Read verse 2.** Commentators are somewhat divided about how to interpret this. Some think it portrays Joseph as a 'tell-tale' and a 'grass' - trying to get his brothers into trouble and to further ingratiate himself with his father. I used understand it this way. But I now think it's a wrong interpretation. It's better to see this reporting as Joseph being an *obedient son* to his father. He was *commanded* by his father Jacob to bring these reports. It was part of his role as *the firstborn*. Now Joseph knew that a *bad report* would make him unpopular with his brothers, but rather than cover up his brothers' wrong behaviour and save himself from the brothers' wrath, Joseph honoured his father and told him the truth.

We have to see Joseph as being a *more righteous* than his brothers. One commentator says that Joseph is never reported to have done anything wrong! And I think that's true. Joseph of course was not without sin. But in the story he is portrayed as a righteous man and a man of faith, even from his youth. Incidentally, verse 2 does not describe Joseph as standing over his brothers with his coat down to his ankles and wrists refusing to do any manual work. Rather we are told that Joseph tended the flock *with* his brothers. He did do manual work. But he also honoured his father even though he knew he would suffer for it.

And then fourthly of course the *dreams* also contributed to the brothers' hatred of Joseph. How do you interpret these? **Read verse 5-11.** Again, commentators have interpreted this differently. Some see it as Joseph being vain and proud and almost delighting to provoke his brothers further. He was boasting of dreams where his family all bowed down to him. But I think another interpretation is better. Namely, that throughout the book of Genesis dreams are seen to be from God, they were revelations from God - so here is Joseph simply passing on the revelation of God to his family.

We shall see of course how this revelation from the Lord came true. The family did all bow down to Joseph in Egypt. But in telling them the dreams, is Joseph not simply being faithful to the Lord? The Lord intended Joseph to give this revelation to his family. If you like, this was his word to the family of Jacob. And so Joseph is being faithful to the Lord - even though he must have known he would suffer for it.

Were the brothers right to be so angry and hateful of Joseph? No, they were not. And we shall see of course where this hatred led. Beware of hating anyone. Never try to justify your hatred of people. It's wrong. The sixth commandment prohibiting murder is also a command against being hateful of anyone.

Was Jacob right in showing such favouritism towards Joseph? Most people are agreed that after Reuben's sins against Jacob, Jacob was 'within his rights' to choose another *firstborn son*. But surely Jacob was at best very unwise to show his love for Joseph so publicly and provocatively. Parents should not show favouritism to their children. God doesn't. Jacob I'm sure knew that Joseph was more righteous

than his brothers. But Jacob should not have acted in the foolish way he did. Had he not seen from his own childhood the trouble that parental favouritism causes within a family. His own father Isaac loved his brother Esau more than him, while Jacob's mother favoured Jacob more than Esau - but it did not produce a happy family. And we should not have favouritism within our family.

But then we move on in the story from **Joseph hated by his brothers** to **Joseph sold by his brothers** in verses 12-36. It's good just to keep the key verse in our minds at this point. **Read Genesis 50:20.**

**Read verses 12-14a.** Joseph is sent from the valley of Hebron all the way north to Shechem. If you look on a map, that's almost 50 miles. So the brothers and the flock are a very long way from home. After a while Jacob is anxious for his sons. (He remembers what had happened at Shechem in chapter 34) And so he sends Joseph to see if everything is well with them. In fact this is an expression of Jacob's *love* for all his sons. He was worried about them. He wanted news that they were alright. And so he sends Joseph, and again Joseph is obedient to his father.

**Read verse 14b – 17.** We can see in these verses the providence of God. The Lord would send Joseph into Egypt. So Joseph doesn't give up when he cannot at first find his brothers. And that's because Joseph not only loved his father but also loved his brothers. Where were they? *Were* they alright? Then the providence of God is seen in that Joseph 'just happens' to meet a man who heard the brothers' plan to go on to Dothan. Dothan was even further north from Shechem – a further 15 miles north. So they are now 65 miles from home. Presumably, they had gone there to find better pasture. But in the providence of God, Dothan lay on the trade route down to Egypt. Shechem didn't, but Dothan did. God would take Joseph down to Egypt.

**Read verse 18-20.** Together the brothers conspire against Joseph. They are far away from their father. Perhaps they had been talking together about the dreams of Joseph. But the word of God to them (in these dreams) had been rejected. They would not bow down to anyone – least of all their little brother! How they hated him. Indeed they hated Joseph so much that within minutes they had come up with a plan to kill him. Do we see where the little seeds of hatred inevitably lead us?

But it was not the will of the Lord that the brothers should kill Joseph. **Read verse 21, 22.** As the eldest in the group, Reuben felt a responsibility for Joseph's safety. He knew that the blame for Joseph's death would fall mainly on him. He also wanted to regain favour with his father after his demise with Bilhah. The plot seems to have been to attack Joseph, kill him immediately and then throw him into the cistern. But Reuben persuades the group *not* to shed his blood – let's just throw him into the cistern. (He would then secretly rescue Joseph and get him back to his father).

And Reuben's plan is adopted because it was not the Lord's will that Joseph should die. **Read verse 23 – 27.** These verses really show us the sin and depravity of Joseph's brothers. They take Joseph's coat not his life. How they hated that coat! Then they throw him into a cistern. Now the cistern was not full of water. If it had been, Joseph would probably have drowned. But it was not the Lord's will that Joseph should die.

Chapter 42 will reveal to us just how callously the brothers treated Joseph at that time. **Read 42:21.** Joseph was (naturally) distressed. He pleaded with them for his life. But what did the brothers do? They sat down to eat their meal. What had happened did not affect their appetite. They were quite happy to have the crying of Joseph playing in the background as they sat down to enjoy their meal!

Presumably, Reuben was taking his turn watching the sheep when the other brothers spied the Ishmaelite traders. Judah had the plan to sell Joseph to these traders and Reuben was not there to overrule

his proposal. This shows the greed of Judah rather than his compassion for his young brother. **Read verse 28.** The going price for a male slave. But God was overruling their wicked plan for good, for the Lord would take Joseph down to Egypt to save many lives.

**Read verse 29-35.** Reuben knows that the blame for this would fall heavily on his shoulder as the eldest. We are not told who came up with the final plan of ripping the coat and dipping it in goat's blood. But we notice that the brothers could not bring themselves to mention Joseph's name to their father. He was simply 'your son' (32).

Jacob wept for a long time. But none of the brothers wept for Joseph; they knew what had happened and the atmosphere in the home must have been terrible for a long time. They could all see the distress and suffering they had brought on their father. But no one was able to tell the truth. They had not initially felt guilty, but as time went on, they surely would.

The irony is that Jacob was deceived by his sons - just as Jacob had deceived his own father Isaac. In fact in the story of how Jacob tried to secure the father's blessing by deception, that deception also involved a *goat* – not the blood of a goat (as here) but it's meat and hair.

The brothers must have assumed they would never see Joseph again, for the chances of him surviving in that situation were very slim. So they must have known they had effectively put Joseph to death. But God overruled their plans. And the final verse will take us into the next part of the story. **Read verse 36.**

What are we to learn from this famous chapter of the Bible? First we are to see *the trouble which favouritism causes in a family*. Some children may be more likeable than others, but each should be treated fairly and loved equally. Each child needs to *know* they are loved and accepted unconditionally by their parents.

Second we are to see *how sins like hatred and bitterness will escalate if unchecked* until there is violence and terrible consequences. These are things we need to recognise and repent of quickly, asking for God's mercy and cleansing. Third we see how *sin destroys human relationships and causes others pain and misery* – seen here especially in the lives of both Joseph and Jacob.

But finally we are to see that *God works through human sin in wonderful ways* that we cannot fathom or see. For the story of Joseph is really the story of how the Lord *saves* the whole of Jacob's family. If in the story, Joseph represent *Christ* – the righteous man who is despised and rejected but who became the Saviour of those who abused him, then the brothers represent us. We are those who spurn the word of God and act sinfully towards God and others. God's providence does not excuse us from our actions, but nevertheless the Lord does work all things together for the good of those on whom he will set his mercy. And if he has set his mercy on you, then we are to thank him day by day.

Things are never out of control. Nothing is meaningless and no situation hopeless. We may not see or understand, but God is graciously working out his purposes to give his people salvation and a future. We are therefore to be encouraged, to trust him and pray to him, patiently waiting to see the deliverance the Lord shall give.