

God's Mysterious Ways: Genesis 37-40
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God works in mysterious ways. He uses trials, evil, sin, all for His good purposes. So when you're tempted to be discouraged or depressed because of the things going on in your life, you can cling to the knowledge that God is working out His good purposes. However ugly it may seem. However painful and frustrating the events may be, God is working in His mysterious ways to bring good out of these things. We're going to see this in our passage this morning in some astounding ways. And we're going to see it in two contrasting ways.

On the one hand, we're going to see in Joseph's life how the sins that were committed against him were planned by God for a good purpose. And in the life of Judah, we're going to see how the sins that he committed against others were planned by God for a good purpose. Joseph was wronged, and Judah did wrong.

The Generations of Genesis

The story begins in Genesis 37, and this morning we're going to cover the events that take place in chapters 37-40. Chapters 37, 39, and 40 are about Joseph, and chapter 38 is about Judah. To get the big picture of the book of Genesis, we need to pay attention to the phrase that comes up in 37:2, "These are the generations of . . ." There are 10 times when this phrase indicates a new section of the story. I won't mention all of them, but the first time it appears is in 2:4, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created." It shows up again in 11:27, "Now these are the generations of Terah." And then we read about the life of Terah's son, Abraham, from there until chapter 25. Then in 25:19 it says, "These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son." And then the story moves to the life of Isaac's son, Jacob. And Jacob had 12 sons and, after living in Paddan-Aram for 20 years, he came back home to Canaan. And his brother Esau did not kill him. That's where we left off the story last week, when Jacob wrestled with God the night before he was to encounter Esau. And the next day Jacob was very pleasantly surprised to receive a hug from his brother rather than a beating. So Jacob and his family are settled now in Canaan, and in chapter 37 it says, "These are the generations of Jacob," and it tells us about Jacob's son Joseph. So "the generations of Terah" introduces Abraham's life, "the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son" introduces Jacob's life, and now "the generations of Jacob" introduces Joseph's life. We're now in the last section of Genesis, chapters 37-50, which tell the story of Joseph's life. And this morning we'll be looking at the beginning of this story in chapters 37-40.

The Story of Joseph

First, the story of Joseph in chapters 37, 39 and 40. Joseph is a man who fears the Lord and lives in a way that glorifies the Lord, and yet he is also a man who is abused and victimized and punished.

Of Jacob's sons, Joseph was the eleventh born son. But he was the first-born son to Rachel, and he was a son born in Jacob's old age. And Jacob favored Joseph. Joseph was the favorite son, and it was very evident to everyone around that Joseph was the favorite son. Jacob didn't try to hide it in any way. In fact, he flaunted it. He made Joseph a robe of many colors to say, "Look, everyone! This is my favorite son!" In a family of 12 sons, we all know that this is a recipe for disaster. The father's favoritism

breeds jealousy and hatred among the other brothers. Verse 4 says that Joseph's brothers "hated him and could not speak peacefully to him."

To add to the tension, Joseph has these bizarre dreams about his brothers and even his parents bowing down to him. And rather than keeping the dreams to himself, he tells his brothers, and they hate him and envy him all the more.

Verses 12ff record how the brothers seized upon an opportunity to harm their brother. The brothers were tending Jacob's flock near Shechem. And that was a dangerous place for them to be, because of the events of chapter 34. Jacob's daughter, Dinah, had been raped by Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite. And then two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, killed Shechem and his father and all the males in that city. Needless to say, there was some animosity between the two groups, and therefore Jacob had reason to worry about his sons being at Shechem.

So he sent Joseph to check on them. Joseph journeyed from the Valley of Hebron to Shechem, which would have been about a 50 mile trip. Then, as he wanders through the fields, he providentially meets a man who directs him to Dothan, another 15 miles north.

Joseph's brothers saw him coming from a distance. They must have noticed the coat and knew that it was the dreamer, the favorite son of their father. And they burned with rage toward him and planned to murder him. Reuben, the oldest brother, wanted to rescue Joseph, so he suggested they throw Joseph into a pit. Reuben's plan was to come back for Joseph later. But instead, again providentially, a caravan of Ishmaelites (also known as Midianites) arrived. And Judah suggested that they sell Joseph to these Midianites. And that's exactly what they did. They sold their brother for 20 shekels of silver.

Reuben was absent when this happened, so he was very distraught when he returned and realized that Joseph was gone. The brothers, then, put goat's blood on Joseph's robe and then deceived their father, making him think that Joseph had been killed by a fierce animal.

Joseph's story is interrupted by chapter 38, which we'll come back to, and chapter 39 opens with Joseph in Egypt, where Potiphar, the captain of the guard, bought Joseph from the Ishmaelites. There's a hint of hope in this, because, first of all, Joseph is not dead. He was spared from his brothers' original plan. And secondly, even though Joseph is a slave, he belongs to a very powerful man in Egypt, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. And the rest of the story will reveal how God's providential placement of Joseph in Potiphar's house eventually leads to the fulfillment of the dreams and the fulfillment of God's plans. But it doesn't happen how we would expect it to. It *starts* on a positive note. Joseph was very successful, because God blessed everything he did. And Potiphar recognized this and put Joseph in charge of his entire household.

Don't overlook Joseph's exemplary character in this. He has been victimized by his own brothers. He was the favored son of a wealthy man, and now he is owned by a foreigner. If Joseph was normal, he would be deep in the mire of self-pity. He would be griping and complaining and trying to explain to everyone around him that he doesn't deserve this. He was wronged. He was victimized. But instead, he works hard and diligently, knowing that the Lord is with him.

And everything seems to be going well, except for one problem. Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife found the young Joseph very attractive, and she tried to seduce him. She tried this repeatedly. She was relentless. But Joseph refused to sleep with her. He knew

that it would be a great offense against his master, and he also said in verse 9, “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” You see, Joseph understood the sanctity of marriage, and he also understood sin in a very God-centered way. He knew that sleeping with a woman who was not his wife would be a grave sin, not only against her and her husband, but ultimately against God.

This is a character trait that provides a stark contrast between Joseph and his brother Judah, as we’ll see in a moment. Joseph gives us a great example to follow. On a certain occasion Potiphar’s wife found him in the house alone, and again she tried to seduce him. Verse 12, “But [Joseph] left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.” This is exactly what we ought to do when confronted with sexual temptation. 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee from sexual immorality.” Don’t give that temptation a chance. Don’t flirt with the idea. Don’t put yourself in a compromising situation. Flee! Run! That’s what Joseph did, and he was right to do it.

But instead of being rewarded for his righteous behavior, Joseph was punished for it. Potiphar’s wife, in her rejection and rage, decided to lie about what had happened. She turned the tables and accused Joseph of trying to seduce her, and this landed Joseph in jail.

Again there is a glimmer of hope, because again, at least he’s not dead. He very well could have been executed for this accusation that was brought against him. And even though Joseph is now a prisoner, again he is “where the king’s prisoners were confined” (v. 20). He is put in a place where he is going to meet someone who has direct access to Pharaoh himself!

That person is Pharaoh’s cupbearer. Just like Joseph’s success in Potiphar’s house, God also blesses him in prison. God is with Joseph throughout all of these difficult times. In 39:21 it says, “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” Then in chapter 40 Pharaoh got angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, and threw them into the prison where Joseph was, and the captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them (v. 4). Then one night each of them had a dream, and they were troubled by their dreams and couldn’t find anyone to interpret them. In verse 8 Joseph says to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” Here’s another evidence of Joseph’s God-centered, God-honoring understanding of life. He interprets their dreams, first humbly recognizing that it’s only God who can reveal these things to him. He doesn’t take any of the credit for himself.

Joseph told the chief cupbearer that he would be restored to his position, and, sadly, the chief baker was going to be hanged. Joseph said to the chief cupbearer, who would soon be in the presence of Pharaoh again, he said in verse 14, “Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house.” Joseph was acting uprightly, working faithfully and honestly, giving all the honor to God, and his reward is another two years in prison. The last verse in chapter 40 says, “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”

Joseph was wronged by his brothers, by Potiphar’s wife, and now also by Pharaoh’s cupbearer. Many wrongs were committed against him, but the Lord was with him, showing him steadfast love, and the Lord had a reason and a purpose in all of this. We’ll see that purpose next week, in the following chapters.

Before we move on to the story of Judah, I want to highlight a few things about Joseph's life. I already noted how Joseph was victimized, but he did not play the victim. He also faced sexual temptation, and fled. In these ways he is a great example for us to follow.

And as we look at Joseph's life we also see much more than an example. We see a life that prefigures and foreshadows the life of our Savior Jesus Christ. For just as Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him, so also Jesus' brothers, his fellow Jews, hated him and wanted him dead. Just as Joseph was sold for 20 shekels of silver, Jesus was sold for 30 pieces of silver. Just as Joseph's brothers put him into the hands of Gentiles, so also Jesus was handed over to the Gentiles (cf. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, pg. 344). Just as God used the evil things that were done to Joseph in order to save his people, God used the evil things that were done to Jesus in order to save his people. And in this we see how Jesus is so much greater than Joseph, because he didn't just save his people from starvation, but from the eternal punishment of hell. And just as Joseph was punished for wrongs that he did not commit, our Savior suffered and died on the cross, not because He had done any wrong, but because He was dying for the sin of His people. He died in the place of all who repent of their sin and put their full trust in Him.

As you think of Joseph's life, think of him as an example to follow, but also as an Old Testament foreshadowing of our great Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Story of Judah

Now let's go back to chapter 38 and look at the life of Joseph's older brother Judah. In contrast to Joseph who was wronged, we'll see how Judah did wrong. Joseph is the positive example. Judah is the negative example.

Here's the story. We already saw Judah's role in the sale of Joseph. That was one very evil action in his life. He sold his own brother for 30 shekels of silver. Then in chapter 38 he leaves his family and marries a Canaanite woman. He has three sons by her. The sons grow up, and he finds a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name is Tamar (v. 6). But the Lord killed Er, because he was wicked. So Judah told his second son, Onan, to perform the duty of a brother-in-law for Tamar. This ancient custom is known as levirate marriage. If a man died without producing an heir, it was the responsibility of his brother to marry the widow and produce an heir for him. But Onan, being next in line for the inheritance, didn't want Tamar to have a son, because her son would be competition for that inheritance. So he would sleep with Tamar, but he would avoid getting her pregnant. And verse 10 says, "what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also."

Now Judah is in a difficult position, because he has one son left, Shelah. And he doesn't want to pass Tamar on to Shelah because he's afraid that Shelah will die, too, like his brothers (v. 11). So Judah tells Tamar to remain as a widow until Shelah is old enough to marry. But with time it becomes clear that Judah has no intention of giving Tamar to Shelah in marriage.

So Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She knows of Judah's moral decadence, and she plans accordingly. She dresses up as a prostitute, and wears a veil to cover her face, and she sits at the entrance to Enaim, where she knows Judah will pass by. And sure enough, he passes by and requests her services. Again, note the stark contrast between Joseph and Judah here. Joseph fled from sexual immorality, Judah pursued sexual immorality.

Judah approaches this prostitute and asks to sleep with her. She immediately asks, “What will you give me?” (v. 16). He says, “I’ll send you a young goat from the flock.” She asks for a pledge, until it arrives, and requests that he leave his signet and cord and staff. That would be like leaving your drivers’ license, social security card, and credit card with someone. And that’s what he does. But, of course, when Judah sends the young goat, the “prostitute” is nowhere to be found. For the sake of his reputation, and to avoid further humiliation, Judah decides to cut his losses and let the woman keep his signet and cord and staff.

Verses 24ff record a very suspenseful series of events. “About three months later Judah was told, ‘Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality.’ And Judah said, ‘Bring her out, and let her be burned.’” What hypocrisy! This man had recently slept with a prostitute, and most likely that was not a one-time thing in his life. But he hears that his daughter-in-law has been immoral, and he realizes that this could be an easy way to get her out of the way so he can find a different wife for Shelah. So he says, “let her be burned.” At this point Tamar makes use of the signet and cord and staff. She sends them to Judah with the message, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.”

Judah must have been shocked as he realized the twisted series of events that had taken place. And he admitted his wrongdoing. He says in verse 26, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah. And he did not know her again.” Judah has been very wicked, but he is beginning to change. Sidney Greidanus writes, “This is the beginning of Judah’s transformation. After this Judah will return to his brothers; he will show great concern for his elderly father; he will even offer himself as a slave to Joseph for Benjamin’s freedom (44:18-34); and Jacob will give him the greatest blessing of all [in chapter 49]” (*Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 375).

This is the real surprise in the story of Judah. The surprise is in the prophecy of chapter 49, which reveals that from Judah’s descendants would come the Messiah. From *Judah’s* descendants! Based on the contrast we’ve seen between Joseph and Judah, and especially the ways that Joseph’s life prefigures Christ’s, we would think that the Messiah should be a descendant of Joseph. But God works in very mysterious ways. And it’s from the sinful and scandalous union between Judah and Tamar that the Messiah comes. Tamar had twin boys, Perez and Zerah. The book of Ruth concludes with the generations of Perez, and traces the genealogy from Perez to David. And in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, both in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, we see the names of Judah and Perez, and in Matthew 1 also Tamar.

The lesson from Judah’s life is that no matter how wicked you have been, God can change you, and He can use your broken life for His good purposes. This should be a great encouragement to us when we feel like God can’t use us because our sin is too great. Yes, our sin is great. But God’s grace is greater! To what depths has your sin taken you? It is not too deep for the Lord to restore you and bless you and allow you to play a glorious role in His plans.

A Warning

I do want to warn us at this point: Don’t use a story like this to justify sin! That may go without saying, but I want to say it. This cannot be used to minimize sin in any way. The moral of the story is: no matter what you’ve done, no matter how big a mess you have made of your life in the past, God can work through your failings to accomplish

His purposes. But this in no way minimizes the seriousness of sin or the tragic effects of sin or the infinite punishment that sin deserves.

Don't ever justify sin, reasoning that God will use this for good. True believers will not persist in that kind of thinking. True believers will look with disgust at their past sins, with the encouragement that God's grace is bigger than those sins. And we will look to the future with a desire to glorify God by living holy lives. The point of this story is NOT to minimize sin. The point is to magnify God's power.

Where Are You?

We've looked at Joseph and Judah this morning, and I want to close by asking, Where are you? Do you identify with Joseph this morning? Or do you identify with Judah? Or both? It will be natural in the Christian life to go through seasons that feel very much like what we saw in Joseph's life—when we are seeking to follow the Lord and do what is right, and yet others wrong us. And it will also be natural and healthy for us to have times when we feel the way Judah felt at the end of chapter 48—times when we feel intense remorse over the wrong we have done. Where are you this morning?

If it's Joseph's trials that you are feeling this morning, remember that God is at work. Even if it seems like the world is against you, cling to God. He is with you. His steadfast love will not depart from you. And remember, God is the One who sent Joseph to Egypt! And God sent Joseph to prison. And God kept Joseph in prison, until the appointed time. And God is in control of your trials, too. He has ordained those trials, and He intends them for your good.

If it's Judah's remorse that you are feeling this morning, remember that God's grace is so great that the sin of Judah and Tamar was part of how He brought the Messiah into the world. So no matter what kind of wreck you have made of your life up to this point, God will use your life and your testimony to bring glory to His Name.